

# SANDNATS BULLETIN



**ROOK –A SANDWELL VALLEY REGULAR**  
By Terry Parker

Cover Picture ' Red Fox' by Andy Purcell– this year we are experimenting with a new layout & our thanks go to Andy for a long unbroken series of terrific cover photos.



# Volume 30 No. 1

## MARCH 2008

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Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club (SANDNATS) was formed in 1975. Its members work to conserve the Valley's wildlife, help others to enjoy it, and liaise with Sandwell Council about the management of the Valley.

### OFFICERS

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|---|----------------|---|
| • <b>PRESIDENT - John Shrimpton</b>   | <b>PAGE 3</b>  | <b>CONTENTS</b><br>Editorial.                 |
| • <b>VICE-PRESIDENTS</b><br>Freda Briden, Peter Shirley                                       | <b>PAGE 4</b>  | Chairman's Report.                            |
| • <b>CHAIR - Tony Wood</b>  | <b>PAGE 5</b>  | Club Accounts.                                |
| • <b>TREASURER - Jane Hardwick</b>  | <b>PAGE 7</b>  | Meeting Reports                               |
| • <b>SECRETARY Margaret Shuker</b><br>(0121 357 1067)   | <b>PAGE 17</b> | Entomology Report                             |
| • <b>MEMBERSHIP - Marian Brevitt</b><br>165 Queslett Road, Great Barr,<br>Birmingham, B43 6DS | <b>PAGE 19</b> | Ornithology Report                            |
| • <b>BULLETIN EDITOR –Mike Bloxham.</b><br>(0121 553 3070)                                    | <b>PAGE 25</b> | Botany Report                                 |
| • <b>PRESS OFFICER - Tony Wood</b>  | <b>PAGE 29</b> | S.V. Staff Report                             |
| • <b>COMMITTEE MEMBERS</b><br>Sheila Hadley, Mike Poulton,<br>and Bill Moodie.                | <b>PAGE 31</b> | Mammals & amphibians                          |
| • <b>HON AUDITORS</b><br>Peter Shirley & Arthur Stevenson                                     | <b>PAGE 34</b> | 'From Bill Stott to<br>Biodiversity'          |
|   | <b>PAGE 63</b> | Forthcoming publications<br>and other reports |

## **EDITORIAL**

First of all, an apology about lost editions. Yes— you’ve all heard it before and the loss of the special edition for November 2007 was indeed a little more than carelessness. The editor’s fires went out, but an attempt to re-ignite them is now afoot with a fresh year and the whiff of change in the air. This number attempts to combine the annual report with the lost November number, taking a final look back into wildlife history of the Sandwell Valley and thus bringing to an end a series of writings commemorating the founding of the Club . We had John Shrimpton’s version in autumn 2006—that of someone who has loved the Valley for his entire life and he provided a story from his very personal viewpoint. In this edition we hear from someone equally committed and at home in it – Peter Shirley— and he views the Valley more through the eyes of a wildlife professional. Readers ought to enjoy comparing both versions.

With regard to change being afoot, readers will sense that much is indeed likely to be different. There is a very present sense that money will be in short supply and that any public amenity is going to have to pay its way. The Chairman mentions council initiatives potentially affecting the whole Valley. The Club is going to be taking increasing interest in developments there during 2008. Members will have been saddened that 2007 brought no ‘peoples’ millions’ to the Black Country but they will also have seen much documentation about changes to Dartmouth Park and heard of likely refurbishment of the Sailing Centre on Swan Pool.

Whatever our circumstances, we do need visions: especially in a time when ‘all is seared by trade’ (Gerard Manley Hopkins). It seems that the Club does indeed wish that the wider community should feel the healing touch of a visit to true wildspace and senses the importance of facilitating access to the Valley. The teams dedicated to its overall management have battled on under Chris Moore’s leadership and last year’s new path surfaces have now bedded down to give excellent access to the beauties of Priory wood. The challenge of managing the burgeoning ‘Millennium Forest’ are suddenly apparent; maybe the Valley has more tree cover today than at any time in recent history, so expect a lot of wood chipping and become accustomed to the cheerful faces of Craig Watts and the ‘Estate Gang’. Thanks are extended to all who have helped produce the bulletin.

2007 saw the death of Rosa Powell. Members will remember her devotion to Arthur and we extend our condolences to the family. Finally, I must make special mention of Margaret Shuker whose dedicated secretarial work has gone a long way to fill the gap left by others who did not write.

## Chairman's Report

Our indoor meetings were well attended as usual, a few new faces joining our ranks, which is very encouraging. Our November meeting had to be altered because Philip Seaton had to cancel: he was commissioned to collect orchid seeds from more exotic climes (he has agreed to come back in September). We were pleased Mike West was able to step in and he gave us a splendid talk on Bardsey Island, We also had to make two changes to our outdoor meetings. The Severn Valley Railway was altered to a walk round the Knapp and Papermill, one of Worcestershire's Wildlife reserves and the outing to Wyre Forest was substituted by Bradgate Park to see the deer rut- unfortunately the weather was not as kind as it could have been.

Marian invited us again to her garden party in July and the members who went had an enjoyable time. Some of Marian's garden chairs had seen better days so the club purchased replacements in appreciation of these events over a number of years.

In October we held an exhibition at the RSPB Centre, which was a great success. I would like to thank all involved who helped put this together.

Towards the end of the year two studies of the Valley came to light, one being 'The Development Plan for Sandwell Valley' and the other 'A Feasibility Study of the Sandwell Valley', the latter not only encompassed the Sandwell area of the valley but also the Birmingham side. Sandwell Council said they would take some of our comments on board and consider them for the plan- we will have to wait and see what they have included. The Feasibility Study enquiry was very ambiguous, so we made comments as to ways forward, stressing that biodiversity of the valley should be seriously taken into account and invited them to come back to us with a more details. We are at this moment in time awaiting their reply, but I think we should keep our eyes very closely on developments (see comment elsewhere in this number).

We still have close links with The Trails Group and The Friends of Sot's Hole with representation on both groups. The updated management plan for Sot's Hole is now finished with a properly structured way forward to secure the diversity of the area.

A final word of thanks goes to Frances Hudson who did much valuable work during her time as treasurer, especially in dealing with the transfer of Severn- Trent shares and in bringing all our accounting processes into line with modern practice. She has also given much useful information and assistance to our new treasurer Jane Hardwick.

Tony Wood

**The Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club**

**Statement of Income and expenditure for the Year to 31 December 2007**

<b><u>INCOME</u></b>	<b><u>2007</u></b>	<b><u>2006</u></b>
Membership & visitors	522	424
Donations	16	6
Garden Party	233	238
Sundry Receipts	--	
Refreshments	31	24
Raffles	161	96
Sale of nuts, seeds etc	----	---8
	192	128
Annual Dinner	182	269
Bank Interest	126	92
Sales of: Bird Checklists	290	-
Birds of the Sandwell Valley	210	102
Fungi of the Sandwell Valley	-	142
Sandwell Valley Flora	4	-
Wildlife of the Sandwell Valley	5	-
Back issues of Bulletins	<u>10</u>	<u>-</u>
	519	244
Sale of microscopes	40	-
Reserves not required -Rent	-	105
Subs to wildlife Trust, not collected	28	-
	<b><u>1858</u></b>	<b><u>1506</u></b>
<b><u>EXPENDITURE</u></b>		
Room Rental	175	150
Printing, Stationery & Postage	141	373
Printing 'Checklist of Birds of Sandwell Valley	...	497
BTCV -Membership & insurance etc	135	191
Wildlife Trust Fee	30	28
Annual Dinner	195	286
Lecturers' fees & Donations	-	25
RSPB Open Day- packed lunches	82	-
Donation	<u>50</u>	-
Purchase of chairs ( garden Party)	20	-
-	-	-
	<b><u>828</u></b>	<b><u>1550</u></b>
<b><u>Excess of expenditure over Income for the Year</u></b>	<u>1030</u>	<u>(44)</u>

*We have prepared this Statement of Income and Expenditure for the year ended 31 December 2007 from books and records maintained, information supplied and explanations given, and certify that it is in accordance therewith.*

*Independently examined by Mr. Peter Shirley, Mr. Arthur Stevenson, 14 January 2008.*

**The Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club**

**CASH ACCOUNT**

Balances at 31 December 2006	£
National Westminster Current Account	503.93
Reserve Account	<u>5596.85</u>
	6100.78
<u>Less: Reserve of Wildlife Trust fee (2006)</u>	28.00
	<u>6072.78</u>
<u>Add: Excess of income over expenditure</u> For the year.	<u>1030.23</u>
Balances at 31 December 2007	7103.01
<hr/>	
Represented by:	
National Westminster Bank current account	1908.09
Reserve account	<u>5222.92</u>
	7131.01
<u>Add: Reserve for room rental paid in advance</u> For 2008	<u>150.00</u>
	7281.01
<u>Less: Reserve of membership fees received</u> In advance for 2008	<u>178.00</u>
	7103.01
	<hr/>

**Note**

**Book account as at 31 December 2007 'Birds of Sandwell Valley'**

Cost of 1000 copies		3250.00
Complimentary, display & damaged copies		
58 at cost	188.50	
Sales	511	2922.35
Stock in hand	<u>431</u> at cost	1400.75
	<u>1000</u>	
Profit on sales to date		<u>1261.60</u>
	<u>4511.60</u>	<u>4511.60</u>

**Jane Hardwick (Hon. Treasurer).**

## **Extended Reports for Meetings & Events during 2006**

*This section is built on the foundation of Margaret Shuker's meeting reports from her regular newsletters. We include it so that it becomes part of the Club record— newsletters are transient and easily lost. You will also find additional material on the events from other members included whenever we can add it. Ed.*

### **January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Florida Revisited (Peter Shirley)**

On a cold damp evening in Sandwell in January, Pete Shirley presented a view of a naturalists' paradise a few thousand miles away. Florida has a superb climate, and its wide diversity of habitats supports a huge variety of plant and animal life, just one little problem – the mosquito. Mike Poulton's report follows.

What a delightful way to start 2007 - being entertained by Pete reporting on his recent visit with Dot to the Sunshine State. If global warming is to be taken seriously, then Florida would be one of the first places to feel the effects as nowhere on the peninsula does the land rise above 15 feet or so above sea level. Containing the second largest lake wholly in the USA this most southerly State of the USA enjoys year round sunshine, and is bordered by the Gulf of Mexico to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. The warm waters of Lake Okeechobee occupy 730 square miles and nowhere does its depth exceed more than 20ft.

The southern tip of Florida is the famous Everglades, now only about a quarter of their previous extent. There is nowhere else in the world quite like the Everglades, consisting as it does of a broad shallow river, about 50 miles wide, 120 miles long but only an average of six inches deep. Much of what is left is now the Everglades National Park. Florida Bay in the extreme south has hundreds of islands, many linked by bridges. The islands include the chain called the Florida Keys.

A plentiful supply of rain is essential for wildlife and humans alike and the absence of natural springs in Florida makes this even more important. In the afternoon on many days spectacular cloud formations can be seen followed by heavy rainfall. Water is slow to disperse due to the very slight slope of the land, and this creates the vast 'river of grass' mentioned above - actually consisting mainly of a sedge (sawgrass, *Cladium jamaicense*). The diverse flora and fauna of Florida owes much to the many habitats to be found here, with palm forests, mangrove swamps, oak and pine forests, sedge prairies etc.

The waters teem with fish and support many species of birds. Pete showed us slides of ibis, snowy egret, sandhill crane, anhinga (a freshwater cormorant) ruddy turnstone and pelican. The heron family were well represented with blue heron, yellow-crowned night heron, great blue heron and green heron, possibly the smallest member of this family. Black and turkey vultures, and the wild turkey, a bird much associated with us at Christmas but not appreciated as a naturally occurring species, were also on show.

Human pressure on the wildlife to be found in the State of Florida cannot be underestimated. Statistics show that nearly 1000 people move to Florida every day and it is one of the most densely populated States of America, however, conservation is taken very seriously and at present a balance seems to have been found. Interpretation boards inform and educate, boardwalks and designated paths give excellent observation points to view wildlife. Posts in the water indicate the presence of manatees, and classes take place to inform residents and visitors about this most inoffensive of mammals which feed exclusively on aquatic vegetation and offer little more than a brief glimpse of their back, breaking the surface of the water as they go about their business.

Fortunately Pete had photographs taken from an observation point below water-level at the Manatee Rehabilitation Centre at Homosassa Springs, and we were able to view at close quarters its rather round, fat body and absence of hind limbs. In contrast the alligator has to be treated with respect and there are many to be found here. Pete amused us with an account of a large specimen crunching away at a terrapin, and explained that while humans are seldom bothered occasionally a large alligator will take a pet dog.





Things of interest to the botanist included Florida's state tree, the cabbage palmetto, royal palm, bald cypress and swamp cypress *Taxodium distichum*, with its knobbly air roots protruding from the swamps in which the tree grows (this is the cypress we have in Cypress Pool in Sandwell Valley). Epiphytes (plants growing on other plants for physical support) are common, and curious 'air plants' were shown. One of these, Spanish moss, a Bromeliad related to the well-known pineapple, drapes itself from many tree branches. It is able to absorb moisture from dew, mist, fog, or rain. Birds take it for nesting material and humans use it as packing material. Mangrove swamps occur along tidal creeks and Pete showed us differences between black and red mangroves and told us that 'mangrove' is a general description given to several different species occupying this habitat. Another curiosity was the resurrection fern, seemingly brown and lifeless until 'resurrected' by rain when it once again becomes fresh and green. Unfortunately on this visit only the withered plants were on view.

Aquatic plants included the attractive swamp lily and invasive water-hyacinth – (if temperatures continue to rise could this be our next invader?). Frogs, snakes and lizards were also represented in Pete's talk, one species of the latter often sharing the accommodation with them.

All year round sunshine with abundant wildlife sounds like a naturalist's dream but there must be a downside to this and I think Pete summed it up when he said that the mosquito levels are measured on a scale of 1-5 ranging from barely noticeable to intolerable. A slide of him dressed in what can only be described as "gear that you would wear to strip down a beehive but still not enough to prevent bites", just about sums it up! To venture out in the evening when the scale indicates 5 is just a dash from one building to another, slam the door and kill all of the mosquitoes trapped inside!

To sum up, I can understand the lure of Florida with its white, sandy beaches and palm trees and all year sunshine, especially when we are having a cold, damp January evening here!

### **February 7<sup>th</sup> Sandwell's Nature Reserves**

On February 7<sup>th</sup> Joe Miskin gave us a tour of Sandwell's nature reserves, and showed how valuable community liaison can be to conservation, wildlife and communities. During his few years in Sandwell, Joe has secured funding and organised volunteers, to help convert reserves - Gorse Farm Wood and Sots Hole - from areas sometimes suffering from local dumping and misuse, to urban havens. This all provided the meeting with plenty of material for thought with regard to the extent that local activity and work to improve community access to wildspace might affect existing wildlife equilibrium. Joe writes later in this bulletin.

### **March 7th – AGM**

The AGM was well attended this year, despite the promise of very cold weather. The business was conducted smoothly. There was lively discussion on conservation matters. Jane Hardwick became our treasurer, replacing Frances Hudson, who was thanked for her excellent work for the Club. The evening concluded with Andy Purcell's pictures of Bradgate Deer Park, and Pete Shirley reminded us of some memorable club activities, including pictures of highly regarded members, no longer with us.

### **April 21<sup>st</sup>. Sandwell Valley**

A group of 8 Sandnats with 2 small visitors joined rangers Matt and Dan for a walk around the Valley on a bright Saturday, beginning with a walk through Park Farm Wood, to see the almost completed wheelchair route, which will benefit walkers with pushchairs too. This was followed by a steady meander, taking in the layered hedge, which is looking good, and hoping for a glimpse of the nesting little owls, which Matt sees regularly. Later long-horned moth and speckled wood butterfly were spotted. Dan almost filled a sack with litter as we walked, and he does this on a regular basis – what a pity it's necessary, but thanks to the rangers for keeping the area rubbish free. The botany report adds extra details of the event.

*(The photo below shows the new path round Cascade—now in very good condition with vegetation beginning to cover the bare earth margins, in February 2008. Ed.)*



## May 5<sup>th</sup>. Knapp and Papermill Reserve, Worcester

(Original report by Margaret, but I have added a few extra items- Ed.)

Without doubt this must be one of the very best reserves in the Midlands. The weather was ideal for the eight Sandnats who turned out on the day. The reserve has woodland, meadows, an orchard and a very pleasant stream.



The full list of species seen on this wonderful occasion would cover several pages. Birds included green woodpecker and whitethroat. The botanists found toothwort *Lathraea squamaria* - which is parasitic on hazel, green-winged orchid *Orchis mario*, Goldilocks buttercup *Ranunculus auricomus* and three-veined sandwort *Moehringia trinerva*. Small-leaved lime, guelder rose and wild service tree are all to be seen. The bluebells were almost over, but the covering of ramsons made an impressive sight. Large specimens of a striking bracket fungus - oddly named "Chicken of the woods" were seen, and an interesting gall was found on spindle.

Invertebrates were numerous and fly finds by Malcolm Smart and Mike Bloxham included a particularly attractive bee fly *Bombilius major*, the ramson fly *Portevinia maculata* (specific to this foodplant), one of Britain's rarest hoverflies *Chalcosyrphus eunotus* (on a log in the main stream) and finally a hoverfly only recently recognised in Britain- *Cheilosia ranunculi*. Lepidoptera included a day-flying moth – Mother Shipton, and 9 species of butterfly - including holly and common blues and a small copper. A conclave of bright red cardinal beetles was another feature on the day. The dragonflies included broad-bodied chaser *Libellula depressa* and the very local beautiful demoiselle *Calopteryx virgo* -noted by Mike Poulton and confirmed after correspondence with Mike Averill (Worcestershire Dragonfly Recorder).

Finally we were lucky enough to inspect the reptile shelter area, and find a magnificent grass snake and 2 slow worms under one of the special 'warm' covers put on the ground to attract them. The President had a wonderful day with his camcorder!

## June 16<sup>th</sup>. Park Lime Pits, Walsall

The 11 Sandnats who braved the weather on this Saturday certainly needed wellington boots and full wet weather cover, but it was well worth the effort, not least because Dave Haslam, who is no longer working for Walsall, was delighted to accompany us, and we gained much from his excellent knowledge of the site.

Park Lime Pits has much to offer the naturalist and historian, beginning with fossil evidence of its geological past. The site has been much used through the centuries – Roman road makers, Mediaeval farmers, early industrialists all left their marks. The navvies toiled here, but today their canal is picturesque and tranquil. The Victorian fathers brought their families here from Walsall on Sundays, to enjoy the Pleasure Gardens and row across the lake. Trevor Crowshaw - one of our members - has postcards of the parkland and lake, dated 1904.

Today Walsall Countryside Services and John Adams - the local farmer - are collaborating, by sowing insect and bird seed mixes and laying hedges, to reinstate lost flora and fauna species, and as a result, lapwing and skylark are again nesting in the area. The group had excellent views of great spotted woodpecker, skylark and three water-bird species with young, also cinnabar moth and blue-tailed damselfly were seen.

There were a few common spotted orchids – *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, and just 9 delightful bee orchids – *Ophrys apifera*. Three specimens, of another less common plant, corn buttercup – *Ranunculus arvensis* were seen, also sainfoin – *Onobrychis viciifolia*. On the canal towpath there was a pleasing amount of the graceful hop- sedge *Carex pseudocyperus*. The party (Alf Cole in the middle) can be seen below. Sandra Oxley – a regular on our outdoor meetings- took the photograph.



The meeting was attended by Alf Cole who is an expert geological detective. Here is his detailed take on one aspect of this intriguing site.

'Following behind Dave Haslam through Park Limepites looking for green things, we stumbled, thanks to heavy rain, upon what seemed to be a patch of some 50 sq.m. of dumped old quarry waste, which, being grey and competent, was reminiscent of shallow, marine and fossiliferous sediments typical of the Silurian era.

Originally these fossils were laid down about 450 million years ago in generally quiescent marine conditions when the southern part of the UK was well south of the equator and to some extent sheltered behind what is now Wenlock Edge to the west.

There are lots of storm shattered bivalve fragments (mainly unrecognisable Brachiopod debris). More readily identifiable, albeit incomplete were an 8 cm. section of a nearly planospiral gastropod (*Poleumita?*), a Crinoid upper section (or the 'sea lily'- possibly *Gissocrinus?*) and the corals *Halysites* and *Tryplasma*.

Just beyond the 'Silurian area' is an easily recognised but much younger 'Triassic' (some 240 million years old) section of well- rounded, mainly pink quartzite along with some white mineralisation- vein quartz clasts.

Among the so- called and much younger 'Bunter Pebbles' was found an easily recognised white Dreikanter formed by sand-blasting during the subsequent northerly arid/ desert conditions such as exist in the Sahara today. There are Bunter pebbles aplenty on Barr Beacon and in Sutton Park- but how did they come to be in Park Limepits... on the back of a truck perhaps? Otherwise I have got no idea. Ask the planners, perhaps!

### **July 4th – Ridgeacre Canal, Blacklake**

The 11 Sandnats, who met on the Metro car park in the rain, had a surprisingly pleasant evening. This dead-end branch of the Ridgeacre Canal is a quiet and secluded stretch, opening out to give views towards All Saints Church and across Hateley Heath. It's a green area enhanced by some planting and an impressive iron sculpture.

Mike Poulton pointed out the particular plants which enjoy the permanent moisture found at the water's edge – great water dock, conglomerate dock, hemlock water dropwort and skull cap – all are there, together with some quite large specimens of rowan and salix, which have gained a firm hold in the brickwork. It was less pleasing to hear from Paul Essex that only the alien signal crayfish are to be seen in the area now.

Peter Shirley identified 6 galls, found on a variety of hosts, some caused by mites, some by gall wasps.

## August 1st – Breeding Birds of Sandwell Valley

On a delightfully fine evening, Mike West led a group of Sandnats on a very pleasant stroll, along woodland edges and around Ice House Pool. Swallows were the most numerous birds seen – mainly fluffy young with short tail feathers and duller colours. Similarly a small flock of juvenile long-tailed tits was well seen, and there were many young water birds on Ice House Lake. One adventurous moorhen hadn't quite got the idea of trotting the lily leaves, and missed its footing a couple of times.

The herons presented a solid, static bulk, safe in their tree top roost. But the prize of the evening was the glorious turquoise dart of a kingfisher, which dived again and again from a distant perch across the lake, then sat for a few moments – displaying bright orange for all to see.



Another eye-catching sight was numerous spikes of wild arum fruits and a splendid Dryad's saddle was also spotted.

## October 4th . Sharks, Seals and Skylarks

On Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> October Andy Purcell was once again able to transport us to another world, this time to the highlands and islands. There were appealing seal pups, cheeky rabbits, splendid skylarks and a dazzling array of shore birds, followed by Andy's amazing underwater pictures of sea life, and finally - from the boat - monstrous open-mouthed basking sharks, and fun-loving dolphins, and of course massive whales. There were fine scenic shots too, and some glorious sunsets.

The show was so enthralling that we all stayed to see it to completion long after the normal finishing time!

## October 6<sup>th</sup> Exhibition. Autumn in the Sandwell Valley.

This came about as a result of general discussions at committee when Sheila Hadley mentioned an illustrious era in Club history when competitions and public events were a regular feature on our calendar. We therefore decided to mount an exhibition and by general consent the best venue was likely to be the RSPB Centre. The decision was made to hold it during 2007 before our resolve started to crumble!

As usual Lee Copplestone was delighted to assist and preliminary meetings saw a steering group set up as follows.

Lee Copplestone - RSPB (general oversight with Volunteer input)

Paul Smith - Country Park Rangers (exhibitions, equipment & events)

Andrew Simons - Wildlife Trust (activities and display)

Tony Wood, Mike Bloxham (displays & promotions), Sheila Hadley (general oversight & liaison), Bill Moodie (fungus walk & display), Mike Poulton (flora & walks) & Margaret Shuker (Secretary) – all from SANDNATS.

The weather on the day was not particularly fine and we discovered that a number of other attractions elsewhere were probably taking from us a considerable number of potential visitors. In spite of this the day was enjoyable and everyone who dropped in got something of value from the activities.

Thanks to Paul and the rangers we had plenty of folding tables, so the displays of the organisations could be well set out (there was a very nice array of Sarah Pullar's artwork). Andy Purcell arrived to contribute a display item, then other members appeared to add to the available expertise. The Sandnats powerpoint presentation chugged on and a quiz on mammal bones with plenty of hands-on material, helped visitors into an initial understanding of the contents of owl pellets. Sheila and Andrew had set themselves up in a gazebo on the picnic area where several alternative activities were taking place. Lee's volunteers on the all-day bird watch performed nobly and the badge maker engaged for the event found himself with plenty to do. The walks and pond dipping were not particularly well attended, but those who went on them were enthusiastic and even found a smattering of fungi so Bill Moodie could get his spore dispersal demonstration in action. The event was certainly valuable to the entire participating team because the day provided a wonderful chance to exchange information and reinforce links—for that alone Sheila deserved every credit in driving the event to fruition. It was a very great pity that the general public did not arrive in greater numbers to take advantage of the wildlife learning opportunities available.

### **13<sup>th</sup> October. Bradgate Deer Park**

This particular Saturday was dull, with some drizzle and an above average temperature, which meant that although there were many deer – both red and fallow – they were mostly sitting and chewing contentedly. A couple of red stags did rise to their feet to stretch, but did not approach the master stag surrounded by his forty hinds. The fallow bucks – very handsome creatures – were more lively, running and leaping, but not confronting. Bradgate had been a hunting park in medieval times, and many ancient oaks are still to be seen today.

The weather was disappointing from Andy's photographic point of view, but he showed us a quite superb area. The rising land, the castle ruins, the folly, stream and lake, all add to the picturesque character and charm of the park. We were all in his debt for leading the party to such a place.

*The rather mild weather may have been critical in denying us a sight of the deer activity we had all hoped to see, but other observations included a minotaur beetle Typhaeus typhoeus – always a good find- as it crawled near some dung remnants. This large beetle is pretty local but can be common in a favoured spot. Andy Purcell has an old record for Sandwell Valley so keep an eye out for it. Mike Poulton was responsible for spotting the insect as I examined some lichens on nearby rocks (role reversal!). He also has some more entomology to present later in this edition so I had better look to my laurels! Ed.*

### **7<sup>th</sup> November. Bardsey Island**

On this Wednesday evening Mike West treated us to an engaging view of Bardsey Island – past and present. Bardsey may be just across a stormy strait from the Llyn Peninsula, but it could be many miles and a whole century away.

This ancient place of pilgrimage is now home to 12 residents, who still live without mains electricity or running water, and with a tractor but no car. Mike gave us an amusing account of this bird watchers' paradise with his anecdotes of transporting a belligerent love-torn bull back to the mainland, and including a new and rather unusual recipe for sea-food paella.

But it's the parade of gorgeous seabirds – many attracted by the beams from the square lighthouse – which draw people to Bardsey, with choughs guaranteed, and occasional visitors like the icterine warbler. A welcome sight for the botanist is the uncommon Autumn lady's tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*), which was little noticed until the sheep were removed, following the foot and mouth disease outbreak. At the end of this talk, many present must have been strongly motivated to make the journey for themselves.



## Entomology Report

Again the year saw my involvement with entomological survey take me away from the Valley, so only a few observations were managed, The year has afforded us two new records of conspicuous insects. The first saw the very fine wool carder bee *Anthidium manicatum* appear on lavender in my garden (1st August). This is a rather local insect and seems to have years of apparent scarcity – I found three on different Black Country sites in 2007 having looked for it here for years with no success– the last recorded sighting from EcoRecord being in 1904 (Sutton Park). The insect is solitary and has a conspicuous set of yellow spots on the lateral margins of the abdominal segments making recognition easy. It can be up to 3 cm in wingspan.



The second insect to be considered is a much less welcome one and this is where Mike Poulton continues the narrative.

### **Harlequin Ladybird *Harmonia axyridis***

What is being described as “The most invasive ladybird on Earth” has now arrived in Britain. Since it was first spotted in SE England during September 2004 the spread of the harlequin ladybird, also known as the ‘multi-coloured Asian ladybird’ and the ‘halloween ladybird’, has been rapid. Native to Asia, it has now extended its range across much of Southern England, through the Midlands and further north into Durham, Humberside, Lancashire and Yorkshire. Wales has confirmed records in Glamorgan, Monmouthshire, Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, and Northern Ireland had its first record in late 2007.

In September and October, whilst surveying for the Birmingham and Black Country Flora, I found harlequins on four separate occasions – in fact one found me, landing on my jumper during a visit to Sheepwash Urban Park.

My other three sightings were from Hall Green, Birmingham on soapwort *Saporaria officinalis* - 20 + 4 nymphs, an allotment site in Kings Norton on common mallow *Malva sylvestris* - 2 adults, and a canal towpath in Cotteridge - 3 adults + 1 nymph, this time on nettle *Urtica dioica*.

Two colour-forms were noted, the typical ladybird coloration of orange background with 15-21 black spots, and several specimens with a black background and 4 orange spots.

Margaret Shuker reports a large number of harlequins which she estimated at 300+ detected during one of her visits to Middleton Hall, near Tamworth in Warwickshire in October. They were discovered on a light-coloured outside wall of the building apparently taking advantage of the warmth from the autumn sunshine stored in the brickwork. During the same month Janet Granger was walking through Dartmouth Park past the war memorial when she noticed a small colony of 7 harlequin ladybirds congregated on the face of the brickwork. Here again with no aphids to feed upon it appears that they were seeking the heat stored in the brickwork. I believe this discovery by Janet is a first record for the Valley.

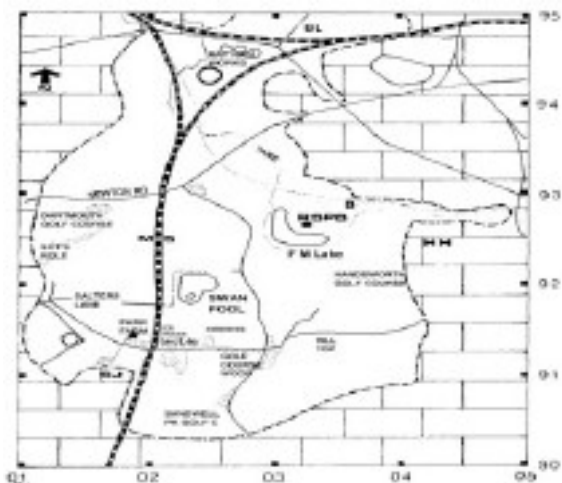
Late summer and early autumn appears to be the best time to find harlequins, at least if 2007 is anything to go by. Trees such as sycamore and lime, which characteristically have many aphids on leaf undersides, are good places to search and sunny walls appear to be quite rewarding places to look for them. During the winter months it is worth checking in garages and corners of buildings for over-wintering individuals. Searching in vegetation during the spring and summer months might become more productive as numbers increase.

The long-term impact from harlequins on indigenous ladybirds and other beneficial insects is hard to predict, but when one delves into the life cycle there is cause for concern. Unlike native species their diet does not seem to be confined to aphids and scale insects. The eggs, larvae and pupae of other ladybirds are readily taken along with caterpillars and lacewing larvae. They are also cannibalistic and readily eat the eggs and larvae of their own kind when aphids are in short supply. In addition to this, hibernation is not as lengthy as in native species giving them a head start in spring. In realistic terms harlequins out-compete other ladybirds in every department and offer a real threat. Predictions of this nature may be premature, and it would be wrong to make assumptions but the future does not look bright for our native species if the current rate of spread continues.

Is there anything we can do to help? Firstly I think we should all make ourselves familiar with the harlequin ladybird with its many spot variations. The best way to do this is by looking at internet sites devoted to the subject. These are easily found by typing in 'harlequin ladybird' and doing a search. Photos of native species as well as variable forms of harlequin ladybirds are all there to see. Secondly we can assist the survey team monitoring its rapid spread by reporting any sightings. These should be sent on-line at [www.harlequin-survey.org](http://www.harlequin-survey.org) or by post to Ladybird Research Group, University of Cambridge, 219d Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL preferably with a photograph for verification.

Mike Poulton

## ORNITHOLOGY REPORT



### JANUARY

The early days of the year saw no unusual birds. Eight snipe and a single water rail were at FML on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, whilst 3 female goldeneye and a single male wood duck were there on the 5<sup>th</sup>. A party of 4 willow tit were seen near FML on the 7<sup>th</sup>. The highest number of goosander at this location was 36 on the 9<sup>th</sup>. 30 linnet flew over the RSPB centre on the 11<sup>th</sup>, and a total of 13 gadwall were at Ice House Pool on the 14<sup>th</sup>. A snipe count at the RSPB on the 21<sup>st</sup> yielded 25 common and 2 jack snipe. Ten + herons were at Ice House Pool on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. On the 30<sup>th</sup> a party of 10 bullfinch (5 male and 5 female) were by FML with 12 shoveler on the water.

## FEBRUARY

Four buzzards were seen circling over FML area on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. On the 4<sup>th</sup> a sparrowhawk was seen to flush 23 snipe from the RSPB marsh but was not successful in catching anything. A water rail was on North Island at FML on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Forty one lapwing were at FML on the 13<sup>th</sup>, whilst on the same day, birds noted around Newton Fields included 2 stonechat, 2 redpoll, 33 linnet, 3 buzzard and a single male blackcap.

Willow tit and kingfisher were seen on the RSPB Reserve on the 14<sup>th</sup>, and the following day, 19 goosander were on FML, the highest total for the month. Heron numbers had risen to 20 at Ice House Pool by the 19<sup>th</sup>, whilst on the same day an early skylark was singing over Swan Pool Meadow. Two curlew were at FML on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and one was also seen there on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Also at FML on the 25<sup>th</sup> was a barnacle goose.

## MARCH

A ringed plover and great black backed gull were on FML on the 4<sup>th</sup>. On the 5<sup>th</sup> a curlew was noted on the RSPB island, and 6 goldeneye were on the lake on the following day. 23 goosander at FML on the 9<sup>th</sup> was the highest count of the month. An oystercatcher arrived at FML on the 10<sup>th</sup> and was regular throughout the month, with 3 being present on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The first returning little ringed plover was at FML on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and had been joined by two more by the 20<sup>th</sup>. Six sand martin were noted there on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Birds seen around Swan Pool on the 25<sup>th</sup> included 4 meadow pipit, 4 sand martin, 6 skylark, and 8 chiffchaff. A wheatear was seen near FML on the 28<sup>th</sup>. Sand martin passage continued with 25 seen at FML on 29<sup>th</sup> and 40 at Swan Pool on the 30<sup>th</sup>. On the 31<sup>st</sup> a redshank was at FML.

## APRIL

As a warm, sunny April progressed, migrants were very much in evidence. A pair of oystercatchers were at FML throughout the month, as were a pair of redshanks. The first sightings of the year for willow warbler and common sandpiper were at FML on the 10<sup>th</sup>. Grasshopper warbler and wheatear were noted at Salters Lane on the 14<sup>th</sup> when 4 little ringed plover were also seen at FML. A ring ouzel was seen near Salters Lane on the 17<sup>th</sup> and again on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Also near Salters Lane on the 18<sup>th</sup> were single redstart, wheatear and grasshopper warbler. Sedge warbler and yellow wagtail were seen near FML on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, whilst hobby, reed warbler and dunlin were there on the following day. A garganey was on FML on the 25<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup>.

A lapwing with 2 young was on North Island on the 27<sup>th</sup>, and on the same day 20 house martins and a swift were over FML. A marsh tit was on the RSPB reserve on the 28<sup>th</sup>, when 2 wheatear and 2 whinchat were also seen off Salters Lane. 4 little ringed plover were still at FML on the 30<sup>th</sup>, when 6 gadwall were also present on the lake.



*Treading pair of LRP at Forge Mill Lake on 9th June (AJP).*

## MAY

The pair of oystercatchers at FML continued to be seen regularly and it began to look as if they might breed. On the 1<sup>st</sup> a total of 12 lapwings, including 3 young were present on North Island. Also at FML on the 1<sup>st</sup> were 4 snipe, 2 redshank and 4 little ringed plover. At the Ice House Pool heronry, the breeding season was well under way with up to 20 pairs thought to have raised young.

A wood warbler was at Priory Woods on the 4<sup>th</sup>. On the following day, 6 little ringed plover were at FML. Three dunlin were at FML on the 10<sup>th</sup> and a yellow wagtail was seen nearby. On the same day, a peregrine was seen at Swan Pool. 6 cygnets were noted with the resident pair of mute swans at North Island on the 10<sup>th</sup>, whilst on the following day 160+ swift, 20+ swallow, 15+ house martin and 10+ sand martin were over FML.

Three goosander were still at FML on the 17<sup>th</sup>. A spotted flycatcher was near Swan Pool on the 19<sup>th</sup> and a yellowhammer was in the paddocks the following day. Another yellowhammer sighting was from Salters Lane on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Eight gadwall young were in the RSPB marsh area on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

## JUNE

The success story of the (very wet) summer was the first breeding record of oystercatcher for the Valley (*see AJP photo below*). The two adults with a single young were first seen on the 5<sup>th</sup>, and all were to survive the flooding that was to come. An adult little grebe with one young was on FML on the 9<sup>th</sup>, and a gadwall with 12 young was there on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Heavy rain and rising water levels resulted in the River Tame flowing over into FML on the 15<sup>th</sup>. This caused many nests to be washed out and young birds to be lost. Water levels in the lake were high enough to completely cover the RSPB island and the bottom of the slipway near the river bridge. Despite the devastation caused to wildfowl, 8 reed warbler with 2 juveniles were in the RSPB marsh on the 18<sup>th</sup>. A ring necked parakeet was also on the reserve on the same day. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, a grasshopper warbler was by the railway line adjacent to the reserve. Two common tern and 2 common sandpiper were at FML on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. At the same location on the 29<sup>th</sup> an adult gadwall was seen with 12 young, and a male pochard put in an appearance.



## JULY

Three common tern were over FML on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and a ruddy duck was on the lake. On the following day, an arctic tern was also at FML. On the 10<sup>th</sup> the oystercatcher family at FML were briefly joined by 3 more of the species. On the 11<sup>th</sup> a juvenile yellow wagtail was seen near FML. On the 21<sup>st</sup> both marsh and willow tit were on the RSPB reserve, and it is thought that both species bred in the vicinity. Also on the 21<sup>st</sup> a green woodpecker with 3 juveniles was on the reserve. With numerous gadwall sightings around FML over the summer, it is believed that 3 pairs bred producing 20 young. A dunlin was on the RSPB island on the 27<sup>th</sup> and a common sandpiper was noted there the next day.

## AUGUST

The family of oystercatchers were still at FML on the 3<sup>rd</sup> but by mid month all three appeared to have departed. A tree pipit was at Hill Top on the 9<sup>th</sup>. A Mediterranean gull arrived at FML on the 10<sup>th</sup> and was seen regularly around the lake for the rest of the month. A greenshank flew over FML on the 13<sup>th</sup>, and 9 shoveler were on the lake on the following day. On the 25<sup>th</sup> a garganey in eclipse plumage was at FML. On the same day, 8 ring necked parakeets were seen on Hill Top Golf Course. On the 28<sup>th</sup> a spotted flycatcher was in the paddocks. By the end of the month, 20 teal were in evidence at FML.

## SEPTEMBER

Return migrants are to be seen passing through the Valley at this time of year and Hill Top is always a favoured location to find them. Noted there on the 3<sup>rd</sup> were 10 spotted flycatcher, 30+ blackcap, 6 whitethroat, and single tree pipit, redstart, lesser whitethroat and garden warbler. Added to the list on the following day were single wheatear, whinchat and grasshopper warbler. Also on the 4<sup>th</sup>, a hobby and 3 whinchat were seen near Salters Lane. Mid month brought a quiet period, although 60+ lapwing were at FML on several occasions and a pair of ring necked parakeet were seen on the RSPB on a couple of days. A lesser spotted woodpecker was near the RSPB reserve on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Noted at Ice House Pool on the 29<sup>th</sup> were a juvenile common gull and 8 gadwall. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, 15 snipe were on the RSPB reserve, whilst a count at Hill Top revealed 3 siskin, 7+ chiffchaff, 10+ meadow pipit, 2 nuthatch, 4 skylark, 7 song thrush, 8 redwing, a single swallow and 2 ring necked parakeet.

## OCTOBER

Fourteen snipe were at FML, with a further 11 in the RSPB marsh on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. On the same day, a rock pipit was seen near the lake and 50+ swallow and 9 house martin were noted flying south overhead. On the 4<sup>th</sup> a stonechat was by Swan Pool where a kingfisher was also seen. Winter wildfowl were in evidence at FML on the 14<sup>th</sup> with 52 teal, 51 pochard, and 5 wigeon present, being joined by 2 goosander a couple of days later. Also at FML on the 16<sup>th</sup> was a first winter great black backed gull. On the 20<sup>th</sup> a lesser spotted woodpecker was seen on the RSPB reserve. Ten gadwall and 2 wigeon were at Ice House Pool on the 26<sup>th</sup>. A trio of ring necked parakeets were noted along the old coal road on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

## NOVEMBER

A barn owl was seen near the Social Club on Tanhouse Avenue at 9.30pm on the 1<sup>st</sup>. A first winter ring ouzel was caught and ringed during a session at Hill Top on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a brambling was noted there the next day. A kingfisher was at Cascade Pool on the 7<sup>th</sup> and again on the 9<sup>th</sup>. Also on the 9<sup>th</sup>, three kittiwake were at Dartmouth Park Pool.

A pair of brambling were at the RSPB reserve on the 17<sup>th</sup>. On the 21<sup>st</sup> a male mandarin duck was at FML. A Mediterranean gull arrived at FML on the 25<sup>th</sup>, staying till the 28<sup>th</sup>. An exotic visitor to the RSPB reserve on the 25<sup>th</sup> was a mitred parakeet, which then reappeared on the 30<sup>th</sup> before disappearing. This bird is superficially similar to the ring necked parakeet, though lacking the ring and with a red face, and was no doubt an escape. 22 goosander were at FML by the month's end.

## DECEMBER

Eighteen snipe were in the marsh, with another 3 on the island on the RSPB reserve on the 4<sup>th</sup>. A barn owl was seen over the 35 acre meadow (adjacent to the River Tame and Newton Road) at 6.30pm on the 8<sup>th</sup>, and was reported regularly during the evenings over the next few days at the same location. 30+ siskin were seen near FML on the 9<sup>th</sup>, with 4 willow tit in the same area.

Single willow and marsh tit were on the RSPB reserve on the 12<sup>th</sup>. 2 stonechat were near the Social Club on the 14<sup>th</sup> and continued to be seen there over the next couple of days. On the 15<sup>th</sup> a mixed flock of 60+ redpoll and siskin were along the farm trail at FMF. On the following day, 80 lapwing were at FML.

Thanks to staff at Sandwell Valley RSPB Reserve and contributors to their log book, and to staff from Sandwell MBC Countryside Services who provided information for this report.

Paul Smith, Nature Conservation Officer, Sandwell MBC.





## Sandwell Valley Botany Report 2007

On a sunny February day a survey of the snowdrop *Galanthus nivalis* sites was carried out by John Shrimpton and myself and our finds were as follows:

John's Pool produced 18 clumps of various sized, single-flowered plants plus a few non-flowering specimens. Here too we discovered 2 clumps of *Crocus tommasinianus* which had not previously been seen at this site.

Priory Wood was disappointing with no snowdrops found, but a good specimen of hart's-tongue fern *Phyllitis scolopendrium* in woodland to the side of the path at SP 02164 91386 was some compensation for this. Most of the local records for this fern are from brickwork mortar and the dark, damp environment of roadside drains, and very few from the woodland floor.

A large, slightly separated clump of snowdrops - or it could have been individual smaller plants consisting of about 100 single-flowered blooms - was noted growing amongst ivy on the bank of the Ha-Ha at SP 0226 9131. Top Pool produced 3 double-flowered clumps at SP 0251 9140. A large, double-flowered clump having in excess of 50 flowers was found again by John between the path and road at SP 0292 9142 along Park Lane, and this concluded our walk with all known snowdrop sites having been visited.

Our customary springtime meeting led by the Sandwell Valley Rangers took place during April. Our leaders this year were Dan 'Earthquake' Cooper and Matt Hadlington who led us through Park Farm Wood and around Ice-house and Cascade Lakes. Here we were introduced to the tallest tree in Sandwell Valley, a planted lime *Tilia x vulgaris* which Dan confessed he had climbed and taken photographs from the top. Nearby there lay a mature beech tree which had recently fallen, revealing an enormous but very shallow root system. Dan informed us that it would be left there because it lay well away from the path and was considered to be of no danger to the general public, and in the course of time would become host to the many organisms that aid the process of decomposition.

After a brief look in the birch woodland near the pylons we returned to the car park through Park Farm Wood where concern was raised about the impact of floating water-pennywort *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides* on the duck pond to the rear of Park Farm.



*Following Dan's comments on the previous page, here is another example of good practice in leaving a variety of dead wood to decay naturally. Ed*

*Mike Poulton's report continues:*

Sot's Hole bluebell walk is firmly establishing itself as a popular annual event, and this year's walk held at the end of April coincided with the bluebells at the peak of their flowering season. A group of at least 25 people attended on a sunny spring morning and were greeted by Jo Miskin, the organiser of the meeting, who pointed out the work that had been carried out by the Friends of Sot's Hole and volunteers during the last year. This included the removal of large quantities of garden rubbish and other litter from the rear of gardens along Temple Meadows Road and was shortly to be followed up with treatment of Japanese knotweed on the bank and elsewhere in the woodland. John Shrimpton, Tony Wood and myself were volunteer leaders for the walk, and were each allocated a small group to lead. We proceeded at intervals of a few minutes along the path admiring the display of bluebells stretching up to the top of the bank on our right. Below the dam we briefly paused to look at the newly created pool and noted that vegetation, which included Himalayan balsam seedlings, was already starting to appear along its banks. The steps led us up to the path above Sot's Hole where we could look across the canopy of the trees below us. Mature oak, ash and sycamore grow side by side here and in the spring sunshine St Mark's flies and long-horned moths danced about among the newly unfurling leaves. The field alongside the path now forms part of the Millenium Forest and the young trees are thickening up and will one day form a continuum from Sot's Hole, however reminders of the previous use of this field as farmland were still to be seen.

Several specimens of field pansy *Viola arvensis*, bugloss *Anchusa arvensis* and wild radish *Raphanus raphanistrum* still survive in the few sparsely-vegetated bits of ground remaining alongside the path, but much of the area has now become compacted or overgrown and will eventually fall into shade as the trees increase in size. This year the path along the top of the bank is to be upgraded, Disturbance to the soil alongside it should create the conditions for germination which may see the return of more of the arable weeds that were once a common feature here.

On his customary mid-summer walk around the wildflower meadow near Forge Lane, John Shrimpton reports that the patches of fox and cubs *Pilosella aurantiacum* and common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsia* are both stable. He counted around 150 flowering spikes on the orchids which is slightly down compared with the last two years.

I took the opportunity of visiting the medlar *Mespilus germanica* growing on Motorway Mound during a late-summer outing to Park Farm. Since my last visit a year or so ago the bush has taken on a different appearance with many of its longer branches now bent over and touching the ground. There is a possibility that the plant could root where there is contact with the soil and in time spread out to form a thicket. Fruiting is abundant on this plant but seedlings are never seen. On my return to the farm I discovered a new botanical record for Sandwell Valley. A single plant of pale willow-herb *Epilobium roseum*, which appears to be on the increase in Birmingham and the Black Country, was growing in the grass verge alongside the track near to the paddock.

### **Birmingham and Black Country Flora Project 1995-2008**

I have been involved in this for the last 11 years and some of you will already be aware that recording work is now nearing completion. All of the 718 full or part 1km squares (monads) of Birmingham, Sandwell, Walsall, Dudley and Wolverhampton (B&BC) have been visited. It has been a colossal project and, with the exception of a few squares on the fringes of the area which have only a tiny fragment within the B&BC boundary, all have at least 100 species recorded from them. In many instances the count is considerably higher. Plants from the Ecorecord database going back to 1995 will be utilised in the Flora along with any additions which may be found in 2008. This will be the cut-off date for inclusion of species giving information covering the years 1995-2008.

Many County Floras dismiss garden escapes and casual plants as having no relevance. However, a different approach is now being taken to the species that seed into paving and on to bits of waste ground just outside gardens. Recent Floras accept that the casual plant of today may well become a common sight in 50 years or so when they are updated. From the outset it was decided that all should be included. Traditionally, County Floras contain data from 2km x 2km squares (Tetrads) but because Birmingham and the Black Country covers a smaller area than a County it was decided that recording would be from 1km x 1km squares (monads). Recording monads should give us far more information on the frequency of native and naturalised plants. Birmingham and the Black Country includes parts of three Botanical Vice Counties ie Worcestershire VC37, Warwickshire VC38 and Staffordshire VC39, and species recorded have been passed on to the relevant Vice County Recorders. It has sometimes been confusing to determine where the County boundary borderlines are. Difficulties arise when a stream or river which formed the original boundary is straightened or re-routed for one reason or another. This has improved with the introduction of the Global Positioning System (GPS) which is now a standard piece of equipment used by recorders. The location of an uncommon plant to a few metres is achievable and will be of help to botanists of the future, who hopefully will update the records at some time. We are also very fortunate in the timing of the Flora Project, because simultaneously data has been collected for a proposed Flora for Worcestershire and Staffordshire and both these Vice County Floras and our own have benefited from the intensive botanising which has been going on during the last few years. Contributions have been made by John Day (VC37 County Recorder) and John Hawksford (VC39 County Recorder), and James Partridge (VC 38 County Recorder) accompanied us on many of the recording sessions held in the Warwickshire parts of Birmingham and Sutton Coldfield.

There are still a number of projects to be completed before the Flora can be published. Further survey work will continue into 2008 when a sample of the allotment sites across the conurbation will be visited. Such places offer refuge to an interesting community of annual weeds that are often missing from the surrounding area. There are also plans to revisit some of the Local Nature Reserves (LNR), Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC) and Sites of Local Interest for Nature Conservation (SLINC) across B&BC with the hope of finding historical records that have not been seen during the recording period to date.

Now that all of the data has been entered into Ecorecord it is possible to produce dot maps showing the distribution of species across our region, and trends and frequencies of all species found in Birmingham and the Black Country can be analysed.

Anyone who has records to submit or is interested in making a contribution during 2008 should contact either myself or Professor Ian Trueman.

Mike Poulton

### **SANDWELL VALLEY STAFF REPORT 2007**

This was a good year for Sandwell Valley Country Park and the outlying Local Nature Reserves. A number of successful funding applications were made by staff and by the various 'Friends' groups. Through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, there has been new hedge and standard tree planting; new stock fencing which will enable sheep to be used for grazing; the 'Holloway' has been fenced to reduce poaching by cattle and tree thinning has taken place at John's Pool.

Himalayan Balsam was trimmed and hand-pulled from Park Farm Wood, which has also seen woodland thinning take place.

At Sot's Hole, Balsam was again trimmed and hand-pulled, Japanese Knotweed was sprayed, bluebells were transplanted around the new pond and tree thinning took place. Bracken was controlled by the use of a heavy horse. Further work is planned to create an area of wet woodland, to improve the main footpath and to install a new entrance, following the funding received by the Friends of Sot's Hole.

A section of hedge was laid at the entrance to the car park of Tanhouse Avenue, where the adjacent copse is due to be thinned. In addition to the funding for this, money from the Council's Grot Spots scheme has been allocated to change significantly the car parks at Swan Pool and Forge Mill. This money has been targeted there in order to reduce anti-social activities. Proposals include reductions in areas of dense vegetation immediately adjacent to the car park, closing the car parks at night and changing the layout of Swan Pool car park. We hope that once this work has been completed, unwelcome incidents will decrease and these car parks will become more welcoming to both new and existing visitors.

The area in Priory Woods under the electricity pylons, known as the ride, has been developed as part of a heathland creation scheme. Top soil has been removed to reveal the underlying sandy subsoil, upon which cuttings of heather have been spread, sourced from Staffordshire Country Council.



Preparation for the Heathland

*Readers will remember that this area was extensively cleared some years earlier and Roy Croucher also initiated heather growth on this site– most plants were overgrown by bramble & scrub. Some plants still surviving can be seen near the top edge of the ride. It is to be hoped that the careful preparation mentioned will give more enduring results. Ed.*

A considerable number of hazel whips will be planted this year in Priory Wood, in order to increase the biodiversity of the site and to help enhance the woodland structure.

The Friends of Mousesweet Brook have received funding for Tim Tolkein, a metal sculptor, to work in collaboration with local children to produce artwork to enhance the Nature Reserve.

Sheepwash Local Nature Reserve will see improvements to both its habitats and access routes over the coming years, following the allocation of funding from Section 106.

Staff at Sandwell Valley have recently taken on an additional site in Smethwick, Thimblemill Brook. Additional money from the 'Grot Spots' scheme has been allocated to this site, which is widely recognised as needing a great deal of work.

Gorse Farm Wood has already seen both heathland creation and wildflower meadow restoration, and will later see improvements to the main stream and the removal of fly-tipping from local residents.



Wildflower restoration area at Gorse Farm Wood

Joe Miskin ( Community Liaison Officer: Sandwell MBC)

**MAMMAL REPORT 2007**

**MAMMALIA (Mammals)**

<b>ORDER: INSECTIVORA</b>	<b>(Insectivores)</b>	<b><u>Capture Method</u></b>
<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	Hedgehog.	RC & VS
<i>Talpa europaea</i>	Mole.	MH
<i>Sorex araneus</i>	Common Shrew.	VS
<b>ORDER: CHIROPTERA (Bats)</b>		
<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>	Noctule.	VS
<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	Pipistrelle.	VS
<b>ORDER: LAGOMORPHA (Hares &amp; rabbits)</b>		
<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Rabbit.	VS
<b>ORDER: RODENTIA (Rodents)</b>		
<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	Wood mouse.	VS, CC & LT
<i>Arvicola terrestris</i>	Water vole.	FE only
<i>Clethrionomys glareolus</i>	Bank vole.	VS
<i>Microtus agrestis</i>	Field vole.	VS, CC, & HC
<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	Brown rat.	RC & VS
<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	Grey squirrel.	RC & VS

**ORDER: CARNIVORA (Carnivores)**

<i>Meles meles</i>	Badger.	VS
<i>Mustela erminea</i>	Stoat.	VS
<i>Mustela nivalis</i>	Weasel.	VS
<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Red Fox.	RC & VS

**ORDER: ARTIODACTYLA**

**(Even-toed ungulates) Deer**

<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	Muntjac.	VS
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Key to Mammal recording method:

BD. Bat Detector,	CC. Cat Capture	FE. Feeding evidence
HC. Heron Capture	LT. Live Trap	MC. Mating Call.
MH. Mole Hills	RC. Road Casuality	VS. Visual Sighting

I only saw one Common Shrew which ran across the drive up to the RSPB Centre, no other Shrew or House Mouse sightings were reported. The RSPB Mammal Days & centre sightings throughout the year included, hedgehog, red fox, wood mouse, field vole, grey squirrel and brown rat.

Janet Grainger has reported water vole evidence along the banks of the River Tame upstream from the RSPB's Reserve and is concerned about the number of dogs allowed to run freely along the banks and in the river itself with their owners consent, even though the reserve has a "dogs on lead policy" and plenty of signs to say so!

Various bat species were recorded in flight throughout the summer months. Both Noctule and Pipistrelle bats were recorded and appear to still be successfully roosting in the Park Farm area and the usual unfortunate casualties on the Valleys road side verges confirmed the presence of hedgehog, fox, grey squirrel, brown rat (*below*) and rabbit.





Fewer Rabbits were reported & no Hare sightings were reported to me in 2007 but none were expected. Of our released Harvest Mice, none have ever been reported since the start of the release programme in Spring 2000. Any evidence or sightings would be much appreciated.

In early December I saw a pristine first year fox cub quartering the reeds around the RSPB marsh area very intent on hunting for his evening meal and he was not deterred by my presence while I locked up the balancing lake Hide. Sadly with most of my fox sightings for 2007 mange still appears to be a problem with only a few clean specimens being recorded. More Badger sightings were reported through out 2007.

My first records of "barking" Muntjac in 2005 were confirmed when the creature was seen on a couple of occasions in the Park Farm area. I'm still pleased to report that after the Newton Road Muntjac casualty record in 2005, "barking" Muntjac have been heard again in 2006 & 2007 which hopefully indicates we may have a small resident population. In September, Ranger Matt Hadlington reported that one had run across the road in front of his car near the wall at the top of the hill in Forge Lane.

The Mammal records for 2007 were compiled from my own visual sightings and road causality list, with aid of records from Lee Copplestone, his staff, volunteers & the RSPB's centre's mammal days & daily diary. John Stokes, Matt Darby and the Park Farm Rangers were other contributors ,with only four other records from Sandnats members. Many thanks to all who have helped- small mammals are not the easiest of subjects to find at the best of times, let alone identify accurately.

Andy Purcell

## **AMPHIBIAN REPORT 2007**

### **AMPHIBIA (Amphibians)**

#### **ORDER: CAUDATA (Newts)**

*Triturus vulgaris* Smooth newt

#### **ORDER: SALIENTIA (Frogs & toads)**

*Bufo bufo* Common toad  
*Rana temporaria* Common frog

Unfortunately after an injury to my leg in the spring, I was only able to spend one day in the valley recording our amphibian population in the breeding season. I'm not sure why but then & since my records seem to be fewer than usual. Hopefully after having an exceptionally warm & wet June & July things may improve for 2008. For the first time ever I did not receive any other Valley amphibian records from members or other sources.

on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September in my garden pond in Walsall, I found a two pairs of frogs both in a very firm nuptial clasps. The females were very fat and appeared to be gravid but I never found any spawn in the pool. Have readers any similar observations to report ?

Andy Purcell

There follows the latest of our articles focussing on the Valley heritage. In this very comprehensive overview, Peter Shirley opens some more doors for every reader, putting the story of the Valley into a wider context and enabling additional understanding of many of the events that have shaped it.

## **Sandwell Valley 1975 – 2008.**

### ***FROM BILL STOTT TO BIODIVERSITY***

#### **PREFACE**

This article is the personal recollections and reflections of the author, relating to the last thirty years or so in the Sandwell Valley. It is intended to complement previous articles reviewing this and other periods, especially those of John Shrimpton and Mike Bloxham in the November 2006 Bulletin. The focus is on happenings and activities in the Valley, together with some of the main policy developments (although not legislation) which affected these, and some of the people involved. It is not intended to be a definitive or complete account of all that has happened, but every effort has been made to achieve accuracy. Neither is it very much about the wildlife and natural history, but rather it looks at what has happened with regard to physical changes, management and protection.

Thanks for their assistance are due to Mike Bloxham, Lee Copplestone, Jo Miskin, Chris Moore and Mike Poulton. The errors and omissions are entirely the author's.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Sandwell Valley (or more accurately the Upper Tame Valley) has, for uncountable years, gathered the headwaters of the Tame as they descend in small streams from the Rowley Hills. Augmented by the many springs in the gentle slopes below what is now called the Birmingham Plateau, the waters are generally

pointed in the direction of the North Sea, and their rendezvous with the Trent near Alrewas. Said to have the most urbanised catchment in the country, the Tame has always been slow-moving and prone to flooding. Its route to the sea is a meandering 180 miles across the flatlands of the East Midlands, but it only falls 100 metres in that journey.

The river may have been flowing in this way for thousands of years, but the vegetation and activities on and around its banks have seen constant change. First came birch, willow and alder to populate the marshes of the alluvial plain as the area recovered from the last ice age. The wildlife would have included wild boar, wolves, otters and beavers. (It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that three of those species will roam the Valley again in the future. Otters are now known to be visiting Walsall's canals and the Tame in east Birmingham, wild boar are re-naturalising in various places in England, and some people nurture hopes of re-introducing beavers.) Six to eight thousand years ago people lived in or passed through the wet woodlands and marshy plains, leaving flints as evidence of their presence. Later, Bronze Age folk left their mounds of burnt and cracked stones, and Romans left pottery and coins.

It is likely that by Roman times some of the woodlands had been cleared for growing crops, an activity which has continued unbroken to today. When the Normans invaded Bromwich consisted of fourteen households totalling about 50 people, and there were five hundred acres of cultivated fields. No pasture was recorded in the Domesday Book, so grazing may have been restricted to the higher ground of the heath where West Bromwich town centre now stands. One frequent activity, at least for the last few centuries, has been the digging and filling in of ponds, pools and lakes, as people took advantage of the abundant water supply for power, food (Swan Pool was originally used to keep fish for the monks' table) amenity and, in recent times, for nature conservation.

Through mediaeval times a hermit (or succession of hermits) and then the monks of Sandwell Priory scraped their living along the river banks, before the priory was replaced. First the Cliffords, then the Whorwoods, occupied the land and built houses, before the Legge family, having bought the land in 1701, built the more lavish Sandwell Hall. The Hall began the long association of this family (the Earls of Dartmouth) with West Bromwich. Their contribution to the Valley's landscape was varied and profound. They 'improved' much of the land around the Tame for agriculture, growing food and keeping livestock. They also laid out extensive parklands around the Hall and kept many deer there. Less in keeping with the rural character of the area they also developed the mining industry, and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw Jubilee Colliery operating from 1900 to 1957. The remains of the mine buildings now serve as a boat store, and much of the old pit slag heap went as foundation materials for the motorway which now cuts the Valley in half. (The neighbouring Hamstead Colliery operated for 90 years, from 1875 to 1965.) The picture (overleaf) shows Swan Pool and the slag heap in 1965.



With West Bromwich becoming more industrialised the Earls of Dartmouth moved to Patshull Park in 1853. Their legacy includes Sandwell Park Farm, the industrial archaeology of the remains of the mine and its railway, the relic parkland of the southern part of the Valley (which includes Sandwell Park Golf Course) and the Valley's link to the town of West Bromwich, Dartmouth Park, on land first given to the town by the Earl in 1877. At about the same time otters were last seen on the River Tame. The Hall itself was demolished in the 1930s.

Farming remained a significant, although declining activity until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1720 there were more than 20 farms over 25 acres (10ha) in area, by 1855 there were 18, and in 1969 only five. These were all in the east of the parish – in other words what we now call the Sandwell Valley. In 1845 the parish contained nearly 2,400 acres (970 ha) of arable land and nearly 1,200 (485 ha) acres of meadow and pasture which was subject to tithes, and another (undefined) 700 acres (280 ha) free of tithes. Just over a century later only 1258 acres (510 ha) of farmland were left. As early as 1801 farmers and their labourers accounted for only 245 people out of a local population of 5,687. Today there is only Park Farm (which now includes Hill House Farm) Forge Farm and Forge Mill Farm. Only Forge Farm has a private tenant, the other two being operated by Sandwell Council as heritage and demonstration farms.

As well as the creation and filling in of waterbodies the felling and planting of woodlands has also been a feature for the last one thousand years or so. In 1086 local woodland occupied land of about one league by half a league: if a league is reckoned to be about three miles, that is four and a half square miles, which equates to roughly 1150 ha. In 1526 it is known that there was a wooded park belonging to the manor and, more precisely, 145 acres (60 ha) on Sandwell Priory's land.

The needs of industry from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century on meant that much of this woodland was clear felled or coppiced to provide timber for building (for example the oaks which gave 'Oak House' its name went for lock gates) and for fuel for furnaces and hearths.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century 'extensive' woodland was still present at Sandwell Park, some of which was no doubt planted for amenity to shield the estate from surrounding industry.

## THE 1970S - FROM INDUSTRY TO AMENITY

Considering the foregoing it is perhaps surprising that an event held on 5 July 1975 should be called 'Official Opening of The Sandwell Valley'. This was, however, the case. The newly formed Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell produced a 12 page A4 programme to mark the opening, performed by John Silkin, the Minister for Planning and Local Government. The Mayor was Cllr. W.H. Walker, and the Chair of the Amenity and Recreation Committee was Cllr. J. W. McKenzie. Although not mentioned in the programme Bill Stott was the Warden of the Valley. The ceremony was held at Swan Pool and included the obligatory symbolic tree planting. (Does anyone know if the tree has survived?)

The programme information demonstrates the main strands of thinking about, and intentions for, the Valley. It gives a brief history, including a photograph of Sandwell Hall, a sketch map, and short comments about planning policies, recent developments, facilities and future plans. These sections are accompanied by reasonable drawings of plants, fungi and birds.

The map showed the Valley as extending from the Expressway and Junction 1 of the M5 in the south west, to Aston University Playing Fields and Peak House Farm in the north east. Birmingham City's land was mainly obscured by an inset providing the following land-use information:

<i>Public open space and sports grounds</i>	<i>640 acres (259 ha)</i>
<i>University and school playing fields</i>	<i>120 acres (49 ha)</i>
<i>Private sports grounds and golf courses</i>	<i>150 acres (61 ha)</i>
<i>Farmland and riding stables</i>	<i>600 acres (243 ha)</i>
<i>Tame drainage and authority works</i>	<i>80 acres (32 ha)</i>

That is a total of 1590 acres (607 ha) to which another table in the programme adds 110 acres (45 ha) of 'miscellaneous uses' to give a grand total of 1700 acres (688 ha). The second table breaks some of the figures down, indicating that in the first category above there are 80 acres (32 ha) of '*mature and new woodlands*', and 30 acres (12 ha) of '*lakes and pools*'. The amount of farmland without the riding stables is given as 460 acres (186 ha). There were no designated nature reserves or nature conservation sites, although some encouraging comments were made, for example:

*'The Western side of the Motorway will mainly provide the home for quiet countryside rambling and a haven for naturalists to study and enjoy the extensive flora and fauna of the Valley, meander through the Nature Trails and so provide an escape route from the pressure of urban life to a more contemplative atmosphere.'*

It is interesting to note that now, with the exception of Park Farm and Sot's Hole and Bluebell Woods, the main nature conservation interest is east of the motorway, including Priory Woods, Ice House Lake, Forge Mill Lake and the RSPB Centre.

It is also noted that:

*'There is a Warden's office in the Valley, with the headquarters of the Sandwell Valley Field Naturalists' Club at the newly-established Environmental Studies Centre. Escorted Nature Trail tours are provided and slide shows given to schools and local organisations.'*

The 'Future Development and Management Programme' section is less encouraging, saying of 'Nature Trails' merely 'To create further trails and Countryside Walks'. To be fair the Council's first general principle given in this section is as follows:

*'To preserve their portion of the Sandwell Valley as open space for all time and for it to be designated as a Green Belt area.'*

This all came after sterling work done by the Warden mentioned above, Bill Stott, which included a 66 page 'Nature Trail Guide'. This was published by West Bromwich County Borough in June 1972 and gave details of the 'Hawk' and 'Duck' Trails. These mainly used paths around the pools and woodlands of Priory Wood, east, be it noted, of the motorway! There was also a species list provided by the West Bromwich Field Society following a survey in 1969. It was Bill Stott who convened the meeting which led to the formation of SVNC.

The programme also notes that Birmingham City Council envisaged building both nine and an eighteen hole golf courses in their part of the Valley. Subsequently the eighteen hole course appeared (Hill Top Golf Course) but not the nine.

The ceremony itself was occasioned by the completion of cleaning up the mess left when Jubilee Colliery closed 18 years earlier. The old buildings and pithead gear were swept away (no doubt today remains of the winding gear would have been left *in situ*) except for the bath house which still serves as a boat store. The remains of the slag heap were landscaped (today called Jubilee Mound) and planted with a motley assortment of trees, serving neither amenity or nature conservation very well. Those works undoubtedly improved the ravaged landscape, but the treatment of Swan Pool was a travesty of an 'improvement'.

Swan Pool is an ancient pool which provided a convenient sink for the water which had to be constantly pumped out of the adjacent mine. By the 1970s, although surrounded by the detritus of mining, it had retained or recovered its nature conservation values. It may not have been very amenable to people, but plants, fish, birds and insects all thrived in and around the water.

There were extensive beds of great reedmace (*Typha latifolia*) populated by warblers and reed buntings, and beneath the surface there was a major population of swan mussels (*Anodonta cygnea*). Swans themselves graced their eponymous pool.

The approach to improvement was draconian. The Pool was drained, excavated and enlarged (from 1.6 ha to 8 ha) the reedmace beds were destroyed, and the swan mussels scattered on dry land. Sacrilege, not sensitivity, ruled the day. No doubt the Minister praised the sanitised and temporarily sterilised Pool during the opening ceremony. The Borough even won an award for its efforts. Today wildlife thrives again in and around Swan Pool, but it is different to that which would be there if continuity had been sought rather than devastating restoration. This all cost £360,000.

In his seminal work 'The Endless Village' (1978) about the wildlife of Birmingham and the Black Country Bunny Teagle noted this desecration, saying:

*'The enlargement of Swan Pool, which involved the removal of marsh and carr, has reduced the reed bunting population and interfered with a crayfish haunt and a regular spawning ground for toads'.*

He was more complimentary about the work in Priory Wood:

*'The Priory Wood Nature Trail area, however, deserves praise. Imaginatively planned with pleasant unmetalled paths and newly created pools'.*

Although those 'newly created pools' have developed into very valuable wildlife habitats, with the Ice House Pool heronry being particularly noteworthy, there is a strong argument that they should not have been built in the first place. In terms of the habitats available to wildlife, the marshland that was there was probably more important than another area of open water. The latter had never been in short supply in the Valley, yet in the space of about ten years, from 1972 to 1982, Swan Pool was enlarged, the pools in Priory Wood were built, and Forge Mill Lake (see below) was created.

In 1975 the future management and development of the Valley was focused on preserving the countryside character and providing for sport. Even then there was talk of a '*comprehensive and detailed development and management plan*', something which has no doubt existed in various forms over the years, but which has never been in the public domain. Consultation with various bodies was taking place, these included the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) the Countryside Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture. Then, as now, there was no shortage of ideas as to what to 'do' in the Valley. In fact this is one of the recurring problems – the Valley is never allowed just to 'be', it must always be filled with purposeful activities. However the hopes for a '*good quality restaurant*' at Swan Pool were never realised.

Just to add to the variety of activities tried out, and certainly to the concerns of those who valued the relative tranquillity and natural attributes of the area, both motor sport and hovercraft racing were given their day. Fortunately it did turn out to be just one day each, Hovercraft were raced around what is now the showground, and in 1978 a sprint course for cars was laid out in the meadows by Swan Pool (see pictures).



The hovercraft were unwieldy machines with a tendency to deposit their riders on banks and in streams, and to generally go sideways rather than forward. One result of the motor car sprint was that the line of the course was occupied by wild radish for the whole of the succeeding summer, it showing from a distance as a white ribbon on the green grass.



Another major one-off event at about the same time was a re-enactment, by the Sealed Knot Society, of the Civil War battle of Tipton Green (see picture). The skirmishes took place on what is now the showground, with Park Farm providing an appropriate backdrop, having been built only about 60 years after the events being depicted.



## The Battle of Tipton Green (Sealed Knot Society Re-enactment)



In addition to the general principle quoted above the others in the Opening Programme were:

- ◆ *To provide for the pressing needs of an urban population for much more recreational activity.*
- ◆ *To maintain the countryside park and green belt policies for most of the area, including the retention of much farmland.*
- ◆ *To develop the provision of educational activities in rural and natural history studies.*
- ◆ *To join in the preparation of consultation studies with other local authorities and Government bodies in the West Midlands Green Belt concept..*

All worthy and appropriate enough, although the last is somewhat vague. The Council had set out its store, and prepared the way for the next round of changes and improvements.

Looking at the wider picture, within a couple of years of the event described above, the NCC commissioned Bunny Teagle to carry out an evaluation of the nature conservation value of Birmingham and the Black Country. This commission resulted in 'The Endless Village' (as mentioned above). Much has been written about this elsewhere, suffice it to say here that the Sandwell Valley received more mentions in the report than any other site. Amongst those whose help Bunny acknowledged in his report were SVNC members Roger Broadbent, John Shrimpton, Peter Shirley, Steve Welch and Andy Purcell (and his group Focus on Wildlife). Bill Stott was also mentioned as '*Warden of the Sandwell Valley and Acting Secretary of the (SVNC)*'.

At the end of the 70s, therefore, the scars of industry were healing, the Council had some understanding of the value and importance of the Valley in relation to the town as a whole, and the nature conservation world, formal and informal, was becoming aware that wildlife may thrive everywhere, not just in classic habitats and designated sites. And what may be the first mention of the need for management work in Sot's Hole appeared in the minutes of a Club Committee meeting on 11 September 1979 – the start of a saga which continues today.

## **THE 1980S – FOUNDATIONS AND FACILITIES**

In June 1980 the newly formed Urban Wildlife Group (now the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country (The Trust)) organised a conference entitled 'Nature in the City'. This was to have long-lasting effects on nature conservation in the conurbation, and on the resources applied to, the management of, and the attitudes towards, its major open spaces, including the Sandwell Valley. The emerging new breed of urban nature conservationists, including Chris Baines and Jeremy Purseglove (see below) were ruffling the feathers of the growing, but still mainly rural, county wildlife trusts. Official bodies like the NCC were helping to develop the voluntary sector, and were sometimes having to split their scarce resources between the rural and urban approaches. In the West Midlands we were lucky to have George Barker as the Midlands Region Deputy Regional Officer. He understood the forces at work, the necessity for both approaches rather than an 'either or' philosophy, and the value of semi-natural greenspace to wildlife. Before the Conference, as outlined below, he had already commissioned SVNC to do detailed survey work in the Valley.

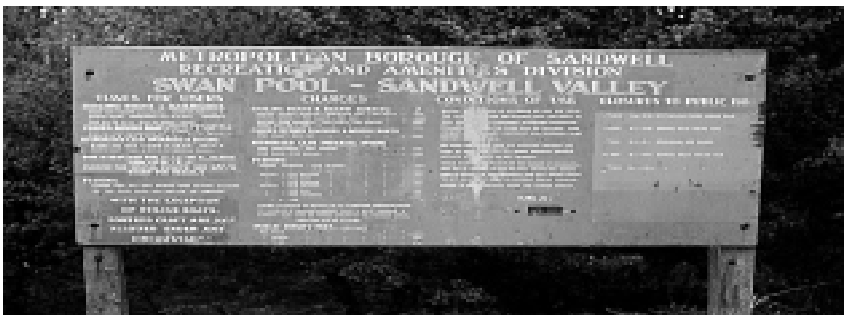
Meanwhile, back in the Valley, and having dealt with the legacy of Jubilee Colliery, officialdom next turned its attention to land nearby on the other side of Forge Lane. Here the River Tame, having gathered at Bescot the waters of its Wolverhampton, Oldbury and Walsall branches, makes its way to Perry Barr, Aston and Witton. Heavily modified along much of its course, both upstream and downstream, the Sandwell Valley provided the Tame with a brief respite from this engineered existence. Downstream it did, however, have a propensity to flood factories and houses, a propensity probably made worse by the engineers' efforts to control it. By the 1980s more enlightened solutions to the problem were being advocated, not least by Severn Trent Water Authority's Senior Landscape Architect, Jeremy Purseglove.

Jeremy, and others, realised that working with a river's natural characteristics, and learning to accept and manage some flooding, was better than merely straightening and deepening rivers, a technique which tended to deliver floodwater faster and in greater quantities to places downstream. Open land to accommodate this technique alongside the Tame was, and is, in short supply. When therefore flood water storage areas were being sought,

it was inevitable that the Valley would be a prime site for them. So it was that the land of Forge Mill Farm was largely sacrificed to the new Forge Mill Lake. This is a balancing lake, connected to the river by sluice gates. In times of high flow the gates are opened and water flows into the lake instead of (it is hoped) into houses and shops in Perry Barr and Witton (In 2007 there was so much water in the river that the lake filled, lapwings' and others' nests were washed out AND properties flooded downstream). The diggers returned, although this time they were mainly churning up fairly uninteresting farmland rather than existing prime wildlife habitat. The engineers still had their day because the lie of the land dictated that the Tame had to be moved to flow around the new lake. Whatever natural history interest there was on the land was recorded by SVNC members, thanks to the intervention of the NCC. In 1979 George Barker commissioned the Club to carry out a survey in advance of the diggers' arrival. Armed with large scale maps and coloured pencils members assiduously inspected the fields, copses and ditches, noting the habitats and species encountered. As well as surveying the Farm the Club's members also looked at the area between the Expressway and the motorway, including Dartmouth Park, what we now call Golf Course Wood and adjacent areas, and the land around Newton Road and Forge Lane. Although the West Bromwich Field Society's earlier survey work is mentioned above, the NCC commissioned work was probably the first formal survey of its type in the Valley. It was a 'Phase One' survey, a methodology later used extensively to gauge the natural history interests and values of much larger areas.

Once Forge Mill Lake was built it was no surprise that such a prime piece of water, in a heavily populated area, immediately attracted the attention of sailors, sailboarders, anglers, birdwatchers and others. Many debates and schemes followed to try and accommodate everyone's interest (in 1988 Sandnats were concerned about a 'sharp decline' in waterfowl numbers) but the fundamental incompatibility of the various activities resulted, just for once, in nature conservation and informal recreation eventually becoming the primary use of the lake and its surroundings.

How secure this position is is open to question as local politicians, sports organisations and developers continue to cast covetous eyes on the Valley and its assets. At Swan Pool uses were zoned in both space and time, the notice board indicating who could do what when (see picture).



One critical factor in all of this was the interest of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in acquiring the eastern end of the lake, together with fringing grassland and marsh, for a bird reserve. Their then Regional Manager, Carl Nicholson, became a familiar figure in Sandwell as he persuaded council officers, local councillors and, it must be said, sceptical SVNC members, that the RSPB were first of all serious in their intentions, secondly that a centre could be viable, and thirdly that the RSPB was not 'big brother' but would be a willing partner and ally with existing organisations.

In 1983 the RSPB did lease the land concerned and opened their reserve, albeit without a centre. That followed, opening in 1985. In November 1984 the SVNC Bulletin editorial included this:

*'Everyone will be delighted to know that the RSPB Centre near the balancing lake is also under construction. Let us hope that the prevention of public access to the area surrounding it soon follows.'*

It is not clear whether the last remark relates to public safety, or the view, once widely held, that wildlife and people should be kept apart for the sake of the wildlife.

The Centre was opened on 24 May 1985 by Simon Groome, then a Blue Peter presenter. The most august person present was Max Nicholson, one of the most important and influential nature conservationists in post-war Britain, and a great champion of nature in towns and cities. The presence of Simon's dog, a golden retriever named Goldie, seemed peculiarly inappropriate for the opening of a bird reserve. A large bone was provided to divert Goldie's attention from the ducks and geese in the marsh.

Local dignitaries in attendance included the Mayor, Councillor Crump, and (then still Chair of Recreation) Councillor Jim McKenzie. The SVNC Bulletin said *'the Society now has a powerful ally on its doorstep for the first time since its foundation and will seek every opportunity to forge links for mutual benefit'*. The sceptics had obviously been won over. The Club's winter meetings switched to the new centre in the winter of 1986 / 87.

The RSPB's first warden was Andy Warren, who thus became the first person to be employed full time solely for nature conservation in the Valley

Also happening in 1984 was the production of a Nature Conservation Strategy by the short-lived West Midlands County Council. This is believed to be the first planning document of its kind. It was produced as part of the county structure planning process under the auspices of the Chief Planner, Alfred Wood, but its main author and progenitor was Ian Collie. It was intended to provide information and advice about nature conservation, identify priorities, suggest a programme of action, and, most importantly, to *'provide a clear strategic context for planning decisions'*.

A full review of the Strategy is not appropriate here. Suffice it to say that it introduced planners and others to the importance of places like the Sandwell Valley, the need for people in general to have access to them, and the mechanisms then available to ensure their protection and enhancement. The SVNC has several positive mentions, as do other local natural history societies. (As an aside, Sheepwash is highlighted as an area needing '*substantial habitat improvement*' for it to fulfil its role as a '*stepping stone*' – something which did take place in succeeding years.)

On the other side of the motorway to Forge Mill Lake the early 80s saw another building taking shape, or at least being restored to its original shape. This is Park Farm, once the home farm for Sandwell Hall and estate. Dating from the early 1700s, the now familiar enclosed farmyard, with its surrounding barns, dairy, livestock pens, machinery stores and dovecote, had fallen into disrepair. With the help of various government schemes Sandwell Council restored the complex, and since then have continued to develop it into the fine facility we enjoy today. Some people bemoan the loss of Sandwell Hall, but it could be argued that if it had survived it would now be an economic millstone around the Council's neck, and an inappropriately large building cluttering up the Valley. Park Farm on the other hand is of the right scale, probably has more heritage value (places like Sandwell Hall were ten-a-penny, Park Farm is an older and more unusual survivor) and has proved to be eminently suitable and affordable for modern leisure and recreation uses.

Not that the site of the Hall and the preceding priory is without historic interest. Another episode in the early 80s (1982 – 86) was the archaeological dig on this land. This was another significant activity, the plans for which were initially greeted with dismay. The area was mature hawthorn scrub, a surprisingly scarce habitat in an area full of hedgerow hawthorns. Wintering blackcaps favoured the scrub thanks to the cover and food it provided. Curiously some of those concerned about this species' welfare were amongst the most enthusiastic when it came to removing nearby rhododendron, another of the birds' favoured winter habitats.



Despite the misgivings the dig went ahead and it was fortunate that it was led by Mike Hodder, who was sensitive to the concerns and thoroughly professional in his approach. He was assisted by Steve O'Donnell, who, with his wife Liz, later became a stalwart of the SVNC. The Club's concerns were not merely brushed aside, but were treated seriously. A steering group was formed, and at its first meeting in October 1982 those present included the Mayor (Cllr. Ron Davis) the Chair of the Planning Committee, the Chief Planning Officer, Mike and Steve, and four members of Sandnats. There was much talk of trial excavations, botanical surveys, crop marks and ways of minimising damage.

The results of their work remain both on the ground and in the displays in Park Farm. Remains of the Priory walls are now exposed in a gravelled area alongside one of the main paths through the Valley. This acts as an open glade close to the woodlands, perhaps adding to the habitat options for wildlife, and blackcaps still winter in the Valley. Of less general merit were the vulgar treatment of the Holy Well (or 'Sand Well'- one of the places that gives the modern borough its name) and the old ice house. The former is encased in concrete corsets completely out of character with its surroundings, and the latter has the semblance of a prison or miniature fortress, complete with railings and walls.

In 1980 there began a very significant initiative in the Valley. It was proposed that most of the land managed by Sandwell Council should be designated as a country park. The then Countryside Commission (now part of Natural England) used this designation to encourage local authorities to manage large areas of open countryside close to towns and cities for recreation and amenity. They provided grants for this. As a result we have had a continuous programme of footpath and signage improvement (although such 'improvements' have not always met with universal approval) interpretation, conservation management and events.

The country park also became one end of a chain of open spaces stretching through Great Barr and Walsall called the Beacon Regional Park. The nation's shortest long-distance footpath – the Beacon Way – took walkers through these open spaces on an 18 mile route between the Valley and Chasewater. The links are being kept alive today through the concept of Black Country as Urban Park (see below) and the idea of a 'green bridge' linking Dartmouth Park to Walsall Arboretum.

In September 1982 Terry Jukes, once assistant to Bill Stott and now the Manager of the Valley, responded to Sandnats concerns about Sot's Hole by suggesting that we write a management plan for the wood. As it turned out such a plan was not written until 1990, thanks to a grant from the NCC to the Trust, under whose auspices the plan was produced. (The plan was written by Peter Shirley, and updated by him in 2007.)

The Club did however write a book. 'The Wildlife of the Sandwell Valley' was 90 A5 pages long and was published in 1986. There was a description of the Valley, sketch maps, a short account of its history, and chapters and species' lists for the plants, animals, birds and insects. The cover was a montage of Andy Purcell's excellent photographs, Andy also wrote the mammals and amphibians chapters. Other authors of the various chapters were Mike Bloxham, John Little, Bob and Alicia Normand, Peter Shirley, John Shrimpton, Steve Welch and Tony Wood. George Barker wrote the Foreword and Mike and Andrew Bloxham did the very fine drawings. The launch of the book took place at the RSPB Centre, and was attended by local dignitaries, including MP Peter Snape.

In 1989 the NCC revised its list (first drawn up in 1982) of 'Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation' in the West Midlands County. Sandwell had only 19 of the County's 219 sites. Those in the Valley were: the unimproved grasslands forming the flood meadows along the Tame adjacent to Newton Rd.; Forge Mill Lake and the RSPB marsh; the wet field west of Park Lane (near to Jubilee Mound); Hill Top Farm grasslands; Priory Wood, Park Farm Wood, and Park Lane Wood and meadow; Swan Pool and adjoining habitats; and Sot's Hole and Bluebell Wood.

This somewhat momentous decade for the Valley ended on a sad note for the Club. Bill Stott died on 12 February 1989. He was one of the first people in officialdom to see the value and potential of the Valley for nature conservation and the significance of these to local people. He was responsible for much of the tree planting and other conservation work which kicked-off the modern era for the Valley. He it was whose vision helped to transform the Valley from a mixture of farming, industrial dereliction and historic parkland, to the complex of nature reserves, woodlands, grasslands, farming and recreational areas we enjoy today. Most importantly for SVNC it was Bill who convened the meeting which led to the Club's formation.

## **THE 90S – RIO, RAY HALL AND RESERVES**

The decade kicked off with the Club marking the passing of Bill Stott, and his contribution to the modern management of the Valley, by planting a small group of trees now known as Stott's Copse. The ceremony was on 5 May 1990 and was attended by Bill's widow Hilda.

On the other side of the Valley a storm was brewing over proposals for the next stage of flood alleviation work on the River Tame. The short-lived National Rivers Authority (NRA) needed to address the danger of flooding in the Hamstead area. The NRA had been created when the water industry was privatised. The new water companies dealt with water supply and sewerage, the NRA regulated the water companies and dealt with flood defence, drainage, pollution and fisheries. It was required to 'further nature conservation in the discharge of all its functions'.

After a few years the NRA became one of the founding institutions of the Environment Agency. The plan in Hamstead was to coppice, pollard or remove the trees (mainly willows) along the railway and the river's bank in order to build a flood defence wall.

The writer distinctly remembers receiving two 'phone calls within an hour of each other in his Wildlife Trust office. The first was from a representative of the Hamstead residents seeking support from the Trust for their opposition to the proposals. The second was from the NRA seeking support from the Trust for the proposals! A stormy public meeting ensued (at which it was revealed that trains carrying nuclear waste to Sellafield used the line) but eventually the engineers had their way and the work was done. The project was needed, the nature conservation interest was not really compromised by the work (some argued that the tree work improved the habitat for many small birds) and the Trust managed not to fall out with either party.

Sandnats' stalwart and man-in-Hamstead Chris Bird was very involved in this controversy. It is worth quoting from his tongue-in-cheek report of the public meeting published in the December 1990 Bulletin. The report captures the mixture of passion and absurdity which usually characterises such occasions.

*'The National Rivers Authority went mightily about its work until it came across the inhabitants of the hamlet of Hamstead...Committees were formed, meetings held, the Green Party was called in – they did not think it suitable for nuclear trains. Would the wall have to be built with a zig-zag design? Would the wall cause floods to the houses on the other side?...Then the demon of a lesser authority – the caretaker – arrived and announced that the hall would be locked up in ten minutes. The Chairman suggested that a smaller meeting be held between the humble residents of Hamstead and the mighty Authority to discuss the zig-zag in the wall ... The last resident escaped through an open window which the caretaker had forgotten to shut.'*

This and other work along the Tame being accomplished, a ceremony to mark this achievement was held on 10 July 1992 at Forge Mill Lake.

Also in 1992 a far bigger event on the other side of the world began a number of processes which, in their own way have had just as profound an effect on the Valley. The so-called Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was one of the most influential events relating to nature conservation ever held. For a few days the world's leaders, media and environmental activists were all focused on the Earth's ecosystems and their capacity to support modern lifestyles.

One important outcome was the Convention on Biological Diversity. This not only spawned the word 'biodiversity', but, more importantly, committed signatory governments to more effective nature conservation protection and practices.



Our own Government was one of 150 which made that commitment. This led to the development of biodiversity action planning and partnership processes. We now have a Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Birmingham and the Black Country (B&BC LBAP) as well as habitat and species action plans at local, national and international levels. (see below).

Whilst the world was gearing up for LBAPs the value of nature conservation strategies as part of the planning system remained crucial. The Wildlife Trust and its associated company Land Care Associates, was entrusted with preparing strategies for the Black Country (published in 1994) and for Birmingham (published 1997).

The Black Country Strategy was mainly the work of Mike Dando, a planner by profession and a passionate advocate of nature conservation. The Strategy lays out the policy, legislative and ecological contexts for nature conservation, identifies the major sites, species and habitats in the Black Country, and recommends a programme of activities to protect, enhance and enable people to enjoy, the natural environment in their locality. The Strategy Map shows the main sites in the Valley, which by now included the Local Nature Reserves of Priory Wood and Swan Pool and Forge Mill Lake. The Birmingham side of the Valley appeared only as white space on the map.

That white space was filled three years later when the Birmingham Strategy (prepared by Rachel Berger, Alison Millward and Peter Shirley) was published. This covered much of the same subject matter of the Black Country Strategy, and clearly indicated the nature conservation importance of the land between Forge Lane and Silverdale Avenue.

Although produced separately a few years apart, the two Strategies achieved functional links through both Ecorecord, the ecological database for the Black Country and Birmingham which was established in 1990, and which supported the production of the two documents, and the intimate involvement of the Wildlife Trust in their production.

The NRA's work may have attracted our attention in Hamstead, but on the other side of the Valley the re-shuffle that brought it into existence meant that Ray Hall Water Treatment Works moved from the public to the private sector under the ownership of Severn Trent Water.

This was thought to be significant enough for SVNC to buy a few shares in the new company in order to be able to influence its activities if necessary. In the event this has not proved to be so, and in fact the Club has enjoyed an amicable relationship with the Company, especially regarding access to the land for surveys and field meetings.

Less advantage is taken of this now, but detailed work was done in the 90s. In 1993 the Company commissioned the Wildlife Trust to do an ecological survey and report. This showed that the site was valuable for nature conservation and monitoring work was then asked for. Members of SVNC helped with this which revealed that there were nearly 200 plant species, breeding birds included willow warbler, reed bunting and long-tailed tit, and that butterflies were not doing very well with only seven species recorded. Minimal management work was recommended, including strictures on further tree planting. An attempt to create open water had to be abandoned when the area concerned was found to have a layer of concrete just below the surface.

Relations with another private landowner – Sandwell Park Golf Club – were also developing at this time. Mike Bloxham (with some help from Mike Poulton) surveyed and reported on their storage area near to Forge Lane in 1995. The areas around and between the fairways and greens, which include bare earth, acid grassland and woodlands, are very valuable habitats. The Report commended the Club on their management of the only pool on their land, commenting that the emperor dragonfly is known to breed there, and that up to nine more species of the same order probably do so as well.

In 1994 SVNC produced its second major publication 'Sandwell Valley Flora'. This was announced as the first of what it was hoped would be an annual series of special publications. The main author was Mike Poulton, assisted by Mike Mountford. The 44 page A5 booklet contains a review of the plants found in the Valley and a checklist containing nearly 500 species. In his Foreword Mike Poulton said that he expected that total to rise to 600 species. (It is now over 730.)

In December 1993, just before the Flora was published, the Club prepared a 28 page A4 booklet entitled 'The Butterflies and Moths of the Sandwell Valley' edited by Mike Bloxham. This gives a list of species recorded in the Valley (probably about 350 at that time), when they were observed and by whom. Bob and Alicia Normand's records figure prominently in the lists. It is currently being updated.

One of the most significant developments, and an important addition to the policy and management infrastructure, for the Valley's wildlife in the 90s was the declaration of Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). Local authorities had had the power to declare these since 1949, under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. The power lay largely unused, but the impetus resulting from Rio, revived interest in them. The NCC described them thus:

*'Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are for both people and wildlife. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally. They offer people special opportunities to study or learn about nature or simply to enjoy it*

Further to this, they published additional recommendations that LNRs should be:

- ◆ *Normally greater than 2ha in size*
- ◆ *Capable of being managed with the conservation of nature and/or the maintenance of special opportunities for study, research or enjoyment of nature as the priority concern.*

And either:

- ◆ *Of high natural interest in the local context or*
- ◆ *Of some reasonable natural interest and of high value in the local context for formal education or research or*
- ◆ *Of some reasonable natural interest and of high value in the local context for the informal enjoyment of nature by the public.*

Between 1991 and 2003 six LNRs were declared in or close to the Valley. Their

<b>Name</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Description in declaration</b>
Priory Wood	1991	82	Woodland, pools, streams and marsh. The site contains the ruins of a 12th Century priory.
Forge Mill Lake	1991	105	Twelve hectare lake containing two islands, one of which is managed by the RSPB, with an excellent viewing hide. Other habitats include wildflower meadows, a wet meadow and woodland plantations.
Sot's Hole & Bluebell Wood	1996	10	Marsh, woodland, stream and grassland.
Gorse Farm Wood	1995	6	Woodland, willow carr, streams, relic heathland, grassland. There are fine views across Birmingham and the Black Country.
Hollywood	2000	5	Holly Wood is almost entirely woodland, mainly dominated by silver birch and sycamore with bluebells. It also contains a stream.
Merrion's Wood	2003	7	Ancient semi-natural oak and beech woodland, pond and Grade II landscape (Repton design). Plants include bluebells.

details are as follows.

These declarations served to secure the particular parcels of land for nature conservation and people's enjoyment of wildlife and its habitats. They also encouraged the local authority to invest resources in their management, opened up funding opportunities through avenues such as the National Lottery and landfill tax credits, and helped to involve people in activities and events associated with them.

Well known naturalist Tony Soper formally declared Priory Wood and Forge Mill Lake as LNRs in April 1991.

A flick through SVNC Annual Reports for the 90s reveals the expected mixture of successes, failures and hardy perennials. In 1990 there was continuing concern over the impact of sailing and sail boarding on the waterfowl using Forge Mill Lake, especially in the winter. The problem was not just one of disturbance, but extended to the management of the Lake through such things as using herbicide to control the algae growing in the water. The Club, the Trust and the RSPB joined forces to try to persuade the Council to withdraw sailing in the winter, but it took seven months to get a reply, and that merely outlined the Council's policy and said that they doubted if it would change.

The 1990 / 1991 report reveals that consultants had been called in to look at the problems at Forge Mill Lake. New concerns there centred on unsuitable (limestone) path dressings and inappropriate (regimented straight lines) tree planting around the shores. There was again a call for an overall management plan for the Valley to prevent such things happening. On the planning front, an application for an hotel complex on the Birmingham Rd. was rumoured to be imminent, and there were indications of a hospital development in Church Vale opposite Sot's Hole.

The following year little had happened in relation to any of these things, but English Nature (EN) the successor to the NCC had disappointed the Club by being less than enthusiastic about the wildlife quality of the Valley than we were. We did, though, concur with their conclusion that the Valley did not merit Site of Special Scientific Interest status. We suggested that the quality of its overall management was more important than its designation. In 1992 / 1993 a steering group was formed to guide work in Sot's Hole. Members included Churchfields and Hallam Schools and the Black Country Urban Forestry Unit (of which more below) all of which have since, to quote Monty Python, '*ceased to be*'. There was a welcome from SVNC for the nature conservation policies in Sandwell's main planning document, the Unitary Development Plan.

In the middle of the decade work continued at Sot's Hole (and the Club raised several thousands of pounds towards this) which included the production of a teachers' pack. A valuable botanical site was lost at Bustleholme, when housing was allowed on the only site in Birmingham and the Black Country where sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*) could be found. There was a suggestion that angling should be allowed on all open water, which SVNC said was '*about as sensible as us suggesting that all such waters should be managed for nature conservation*'. The lack of overall guidelines for those working in the Valley was again highlighted following wood chippings being dumped on one of the prime orchid sites, and inappropriate tree planting proposals in the Hill Top area. These were also part of a scheme which saw 5,000 trees planted on and around the Hill Top Golf Course.

In 1998 / 1999 the hospital development in Church Vale finally came into being. The problem of disposing of water from the new buildings and car parks was solved when an agreement was reached with the Health Authority for the water to flow into Sot's Hole (after passing through oil interceptors). They also paid to have the first dam breached and for other work on the watercourse in the wood. The intention was to get more water, and open water if possible, into Sot's Hole to keep the site wet. Local residents objected to the ideas, being concerned about plagues of mosquitoes and bad smells arising from the work. In the event no open water established itself, and no smells or mosquitoes manifested themselves. Throughout the whole process, which ran from November 1998 to February 2000, Sandnats interests were looked after by Geoff Brevitt, who spent many days and hours in Sot's Hole dealing with contractors and their machinery.

The extent, quality and potential of the natural environment in the Black Country continued to attract attention and resources following the formation of the Black Country Urban Forestry Unit in 1990. This was originally based in the Valley at the Red House in Red House Park. Run by Nerys Jones, the Unit described itself as '*a charity working in partnership with others to help create a more tree-rich environment as an important means of improving the quality of life for the millions of people who live and work in towns and cities*'

In 1995, having pioneered its work in the Black Country, it became the National Urban Forestry Unit. The newly named organisation soon had a major success. In 1996 it was awarded a grant of £3.75M for a Black Country Urban Forest Millennium Programme. When an event was held in July 2001 to celebrate the completion of the Programme, 500 new woodlands had been created, and more than three quarters of a million trees had been planted on 1,000ha of land. Some of those planting schemes were controversial (as when proposals were made to plant on grassland behind Dartmouth High School where adder's-tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) grows). Overall though, the Programme was well-received and provided great benefits.

The Unit's work (which went on until 2005) was a significant factor in the increase in tree cover in the Valley which, east of the motorway, grew from 40.5 ha in 1977 to 108 ha in the early 2000s. No comparable figures are available for land west of the motorway, but new trees have been established alongside the motorway itself and adjacent to Sot's Hole on what was Hill House Farm. The latter site became available when Farmer Brown retired and another of the Valley's farms went out of cultivation. The land is still used for grazing, and Forge Mill Farm's pedigree Jerseys overwinter in the cattle sheds in the farmyard.



## THE 2000S – STRATEGIES AND CELEBRITIES

The new millennium saw the publication of the B&BCLBAP. This was rooted in the outcomes of the Rio Earth Summit (see above) and was the result of years of work by many people, mainly those involved with natural history groups (including Sandnatters) public bodies like English Nature, the Wildlife Trust, the RSPB, EcoRecord and the local authorities concerned. The Plan moved policy and practice on from the earlier nature conservation strategies by encouraging this much wider participation and understanding of the needs and opportunities. The Plan was launched at a ceremony at Park Farm by Bill Oddie, who was thus added to the list of luminaries who have officiated at events in the Valley.

The Plan is not so much one plan as a commentary on, and description of, the area's wildlife and its habitats and their needs, and a collection of issues, habitats and species action plans. The Valley is a key area with regard to many of these, including the habitat plans for deadwood, urban pools, hedgerows, grassland, rivers and streams and woodland. Species found in the Valley with their own plans include amphibians, bats, bluebell, grey partridge, kestrel, orchids, skylark, tree sparrow and water vole. Roy Croucher and Malcolm Smart each wrote one of the plans. The Plan will not in itself generate the resources needed for nature conservation, but it does help to build understanding and to make links to public policy and statutory obligations.

Celebrities are sometimes like buses – wait for ages for one and then two come along at once. Following Bill Oddie's launch of the Plan earlier in the year, September 2000 saw a visit from the *doyen* of nature conservationists, David Bellamy. The occasion was the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations for the Wildlife Trust, of which David is the President. The work in Sot's Hole has been supported by the Trust, and it was, therefore, on his itinerary for the day. A small urban woodland maybe, but now on the list of sites throughout the world that the great man has visited and expressed support for.

The year 2000 also saw SVNC's most ambitious publication to date – 'Birds of the Sandwell Valley', this being the second of the Club's special series. It was written by three of the area's most experienced and expert birdwatchers (Pete Forbes, Pete Hackett and Tim Hextell) has excellent black and white drawings by Tony Disley, John Fortey, Roger Hancox and Terry Parker, and colour photographs by various people, including Andy Purcell and Steve Welch. The 128 pages give a systematic account of every bird known to have visited or bred in the Valley in recent years – about 220 species. Amongst the more surprising of these is the puffin, one having been seen in 1983. (A few years later the Club produced the complementary 'Checklist of the Birds of the Sandwell Valley'.)

In 2002 the Council produced the snappily-titled 'Draft Sandwell Valley Vision'. This was the latest in a long line of planning documents which continues to this day, designed to elicit what it is that makes the Valley special, and attempting to find ways of accommodating all of the interests amongst users and potential users. The basic flaw in these documents, and the debates which accompany them, is that they start from the standpoint of 'What can the Valley be used for?' (and then try to shoehorn everything in) rather than 'What is special about the Valley?' (and what is, therefore, appropriate). The suggested vision was: *'To provide recreational and educational facilities and opportunities for Sandwell's residents and visitors, consistent with the Valley's setting in the green belt.'*

The suggested alternative in Sandnats Bulletin was:

*'To be the finest urban greenspace in England, where town and country meet in perfect harmony, valued by residents and visitors alike for its tranquil landscapes, abundant wildlife and quiet havens.'*

In a wider context the new decade saw the formation of the West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership. This brought together voluntary conservation bodies, like the Wildlife Trusts, the West Midlands Bird Club and the RSPB, public agencies such as the Environment Agency and English Nature, and private companies such as Severn Trent Water. The Partnership first of all published a Biodiversity Audit of the region (2001) and then followed this up with the Regional Biodiversity Strategy (2005).

The Strategy presented five key challenges for nature conservation in the West Midlands, all of which are relevant to, and have been at least partly met over the years, in the Sandwell Valley. They are:

- ◆ *Maintaining and improving the condition of habitats, species and ecosystems.*
- ◆ *Developing an area based approach to restoring wildlife.*
- ◆ *Monitoring the condition of habitats, species and ecosystems.*
- ◆ *Re-connecting and integrating action for biodiversity with other environmental, social and economic activity.*
- ◆ *Coping with the impacts of climate change.*

Another regional factor is the overall planning document for the six counties, the Regional Spatial Strategy. This was prepared by the Regional Assembly and came into force in 2004. It includes environmental and nature conservation policies and guidelines. Amongst these are designated '*Biodiversity Enhancement Areas*', identified as being particularly valuable for wildlife, habitats and sites. One of these areas (the Cannock to Sutton Park BEA) includes the Sandwell Valley, thus confirming its importance in a wider context

Whilst all this was going on behind committee room doors, the pitter-patter of (very) tiny feet might have been heard in some parts of the Valley. The Harvest Mouse Re-Introduction Project was started in 2000, led by Janet Granger and Paul Essex. The initial stages demanded that sufficient harvest mice were bred for release in the Valley. This involved large breeding cages, to house stock provided through Chester and Dudley Zoos, plenty of patience, and lots of tender loving care. In the summer and autumn of 2000 a total of 320 mice were released at four sites: Ray Hall, the marsh in Forge Lane, the meadow between the Newton Rd., the River Tame and the Railway line, and Forge Mill Lane. Since then another 160 mice have been released. Live trapping (harmless to the animals caught) in the autumns of 2002 and 2003 failed to capture any harvest mice, but it is nevertheless hoped that they have re-established themselves in the Valley.

As its twentieth anniversary approached the RSPB Reserve received a windfall in the shape of a £100,000 legacy. This resulted in a lot of work in 2004 on the wetland habitats, and on a new hide. (The Centre itself was refurbished in 1999.) The new hide is protected from unwelcome attentions by a sort of swing bridge which makes access very difficult when it is not connecting the hide to the shore. The habitat improvement work included making three different levels of scrape, three shallow ponds and six new islands. In addition the main island was re-profiled. To complement this work the local authority improved North Island at the same time. With such desirable residences being created it was no surprise to learn that 2004 was a very good breeding season for gadwall, lapwing and others, and that visitors included osprey, Mediterranean gull and goldeneye. Two thousand and five saw the latest SVNC publication - 'Fungi of the Sandwell Valley', produced as a special edition of the Bulletin in November. This was written by Bill Moodie and is dedicated to the memory of John Little, who did much to increase our understanding of the Valley's fungi.

## **PEOPLE AND PUBLICATONS**

For the thirty years covered by this review the Valley's and its wildlife has been under constant scrutiny. People come and go of course, but within Sandnats a small group of people has been involved for almost all of that time. Amongst them John Shrimpton is the font of all knowledge about the history of the area, Andy Purcell has taken photographs in every year and kept our mammal records, Tony Wood has recorded moths and birds, Mike Bloxham has logged the insects, Mike Poulton has kept us up to date with the plants, and Sheila Hadley has helped with plants and birds. (Many other people have contributed over the years, and some of them are mentioned in other parts of this article.)

Mike Bloxham's work on the insect life of the Valley deserves special mention, not least because of the countless hours of identification work. Whether it be sawflies, beetles, solitary wasps or, his first love, flies, Mike has produced lists now containing several thousands of species known to frequent the Valley



Some of this work has been published in journals such as the Entomologists' Record, some in duplicated lists and some in the Bulletin. All have found their way to EcoRecord. His work, has made the Valley one of the most intensively studied sites in the country. It may indeed be the most intensively studied site without an overall formal nature conservation designation. The full list of publications will be given in a Bibliography contained in the next bulletin.

For the local authority there have been several managers and assistants based at Park Farm. In the 70s and early 80s Bill Stott laid the foundations for work continued through the 80s by Terry Jukes and (in the early years of the decade) Dennis Cornforth. Roy Croucher, an experienced conservation manager, was on the staff from 1985 to 2002, and the current manager, Chris Moore, also started work in the Valley, after experience elsewhere, in 1985. Two other key players are Paul Smith and Matt Darby, who have been working in the Valley since 1989 and 1995 respectively.

In recent years the LNRs have benefited from the appointment of Jo Miskin. In 2003 he was given the job as 'Wildspace Officer', with three years funding from English Nature. Subsequently he was taken on by Sandwell MBC, and continues to deal with public involvement in, and management of, the LNRs in the Valley and elsewhere in Sandwell.

At the RSPB Reserve Andy Warren was succeeded in turn by Tony Whitehead (still with the RSPB) Jay Haugh (now in the USA) Colin Horne (from 1999 – 2005, and now one of the RSPB's chief safety officers) and Lee Coplestone the present incumbent. They have been ably assisted by a succession of expert birders who have introduced thousands of local people to the joys of birdwatching.

## **EVENTS**

One of the functions of a country park is to encourage folk to enjoy the great outdoors, and many sporting events and shows have been organised in pursuit of this. The motor and hovercraft racing have already been mentioned. Other sports have included volleyball, asian games, marathons and cyclo-cross.

The Sandwell Volleyball Tournament ran for 27 years from 1970 to 1997. It became the largest volleyball tournament in Europe, involving over 400 teams and more than 4,000 people. Many of those camped in the Valley for the weekend of the competition. Participants came from all over Europe, as well as the USA and Kuwait, to play on the 85 temporary courts.

The Asian Games began sometime in the 70s under the name of the Sikh Games. At first a variety of sports were played, but in recent years football has predominated, with the event being renamed the Shaheedi Football Tournament.

The Sandwell marathons were in the 80s, and were followed by the Red Bull Cyclo-Cross events which started in the late 90s. The last of these was a 24 hour race in June 2001, using a course which included parts of Hill House Farm.

Amongst the shows using the Valley are the Historic Vehicle Parade, which has been running for more than 30 years, Sandwell Show which has a long history, but moved into the Valley in the 80s, and the Sandwell Horse Show. For a time the Horse Show (using the King George football pitches) attracted the cream of British equestrianism, with such household names as Harvey Smith and John Whittaker appearing. The two days of the Sandwell Show and the Horse Show (which were put on at the same time) attracted more than 100,000 people in the 90s. In 2004 'Festavalley' was organised – a pop concert to mark the formation of a regional youth parliament. Although some top rock bands appeared the weather kept the attendance down.

There were, and there will always be, concerns expressed regarding the suitability of such events in a sensitive and ecologically important area like the Valley. Those, like the Sandwell Show, restricted to the showground are probably less controversial than others, such as the pop concert and the cyclo-cross. The noise and other disturbance of the last two events, affect a much wider area within the Valley. Any future plans for sporting events and other activities need to take account of the unique nature of the area, and be organised (or not) accordingly.

## **PROGRESS AND POTENTIAL**

The publication of 'The Endless Village' (1978) and its successor and companion 'The Endless Village Revisited' (2007) is mentioned above. The latter compared the area then and now. This comparison (based on research by Ellen Pisolkar) provides an appropriate summary for this review.

*'Changes to the grassland and its management includes the closure of farms, the building of a new 18 hole golf course, improved access for the public, new grazing paddocks for sheep, cattle and horses, the construction of a show ground with metalled roads and short mown grass, and the planting of thousands of trees and lengths of new hedgerows. The biggest change has been to the tree cover. Between 1977 and 2004 the proportion of scrub and woodland cover on the eastern half of the Valley increased from 8.4% to 22.4% of the total area.*

*Through all this the Valley has hosted a glorious array of wildlife. Better recorded than most sites, thanks mainly to the Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club, the 33,000+ records indicate that this is the most important site for birds in the West Midlands County. Two hundred and twenty species have been recorded, including lapwing, golden plover, skylark, snipe, water rail, gadwall, goosander, buzzard and marsh and willow tits.*

*The Scots pine planted on the new island in Ice House Lake supports a still-expanding heronry, this having 20 nests in 2005. (On the other hand tree sparrows seem to have gone.) The status of lapwings in the Valley illustrates the way numbers of individual species may vary. There are breeding records from the 1940s on, peaking at about a dozen pairs from 1988 to 1998, but with only five pairs in 1999. Bunny mentions winter flocks of 350, and counts of passage birds peaked in the mid 1980s at about 450, but have declined since.*

*There are at least 11 species of mammals, and although brown hares may no longer be present the Valley is important for several species of bats and for water voles. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the rabbit population had, and continues, to increase. Over 4,000 species of invertebrates have been recorded, and there are nearly 500 species of fungi. The invertebrates include white-clawed crayfish, some of which may occur naturally, but others being descended from a population rescued from development elsewhere.*

*The flora is equally impressive. There are 250 species of plants on the RSPB Reserve (see below) alone (although some of these have been introduced as part of conservation management). Various orchids appear around the Valley, there are bluebells in some of the woodlands, which also contain alder buckthorn, oak, beech, ash, willows and poplars. The parklands once surrounding Sandwell Hall have old sweet chestnuts and the remains of a collection of exotic trees including swamp cypress, cut-leaved beech and lucombe oak. 'Less common plants of the West Midlands' include musk mallow, climbing corydalis, sulphur cinquefoil and blue fleabane.*

*This wealth of wildlife has to survive in what is said to be the third most visited country park in the country. (The country park covers nearly 700ha.) Changes in the last 30 years include the development of Park Farm as an historic farm and visitor centre, and the opening of a major RSPB Reserve on the Hamstead side of Forge Mill Lake. These attract 100,000 and 27,000 visitors a year respectively. A third attraction is Forge Mill Farm with its herd of pedigree Jersey cows. There are now four golf courses, a riding school and a programme of events on the showground, these including concerts, games and the annual Sandwell Show.*

*To their credit Sandwell MBC (and to a lesser extent Birmingham City Council in whose jurisdiction part of the Valley lies) have tried to accommodate many conflicting interests through their management. They have invested resources (including ranger services) although rarely have these been thought adequate, and taken at least some of the advice they have been given by agencies such as English Nature. As a result, from just Priory Wood being a 'nature reserve' 30 years ago, the Valley now has the country park, three LNRs (Priory Wood, Forge Mill Lake and Sot's Hole and Bluebell Wood) a SINC, a SLINC and Green Belt status.*

*In summary the main changes have been: modification of the River Tame and the creation of Forge Mill Lake, establishment of the RSPB Centre and Reserve, improvements to water quality, increased tree and scrub cover, a new golf course and much increased public access and use. Overall these and other changes have favoured wildlife, although there have been some losses to counter the many gains.'*

In addition to this there are now reports of badgers returning to the Valley, and authenticated sightings of muntjac and fallow deer. Whilst the politicians continue to dream up new and bigger schemes for the Valley, none of which have yet come to fruition, its managers continue with the programme of improved estate management, taking advantage of Countryside Stewardship, Lottery grants and other funding.

The nature conservation world too is increasingly recognising that areas like the Valley need to be managed both for their strategic importance and their intrinsic wildlife values. The ideas of rebuilding biodiversity, landscape-scale working and green infrastructure (see below) are all relevant here. People want to move forward from where we are, rather than looking back and trying to recreate an imagined but mythical wildlife paradise.

Within the West Midlands Region work is being done on the concept of green infrastructure. It is described as:

*'The network of green spaces and natural elements that intersperse and connect our cities, towns and villages. It is the open spaces, waterways, gardens, woodlands, green corridors, wildlife habitats, street trees, natural heritage and open countryside. Green infrastructure provides multiple benefits for the economy, the environment and people.'*

This idea is being actively pursued by the Black Country Consortium (formed by Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton councils). It is promoting the idea of '*Black Country as Urban Park*', in recognition of the importance of the places and spaces between the houses, shopping centres and factories. The intention is to '*have the largest urban parks network in Europe*' and to '*make the most of our hidden treasures – our hills, valleys, rivers and urban heritage*'. The intention is to base the economic and social regeneration of the Black Country on the improvement, protection and management of its environmental assets. Part of this initiative is to have the canal network designated as a World Heritage Site. Thanks to the Tame Valley Canal this would, if successful, put the Valley on to the global stage.

Whatever happens the Sandwell Valley will have a significant role to play. It serves not only the people who live around it, but also draws in folk from further afield. It brings open countryside into the heart of the conurbation and performs many other valuable functions as a result.

The next 30 years will no doubt be as challenging as the previous 30. Threats and opportunities will come and go. The Urban Park may be the Valley's saviour, but climate change might be its nemesis (not least if giant wind turbines become the order of the day). Whatever happens we can be sure that the body of experience and information gained in the Valley over the last 30 years will stand it in good stead, as will the determination of people to retain all that is good about it. It is irreplaceable, unique and priceless. But is it safe?

### **Peter Shirley (February 2008)**

*Space availability has necessarily limited the contents of the bibliography. It contains some items originating from M.Bloxham which had a very limited circulation and might best be regarded as manuscripts (denoted by 'ms'). Ed.*

### **Sandwell Valley 1975 – 2008 From Bill Stott to Biodiversity**

*Publications directly relevant to the Valley*

1969	The Field Pattern of West Bromwich. D Dilworth
June 1972	Sandwell Valley Nature Trail Guide
1973	West Bromwich Before the Industrial Revolution. D Dilworth
1974	Sandwell Priory. D Dilworth
5 July 1975	Programme of 'Official Opening' of the Sandwell Valley
1976	A History of West Bromwich. G C Baugh, M W Greenslade, D A Johnson (for Sandwell MBC)
7 April 1982	The Diptera (Calyptera) of the Sandwell Valley West Bromwich. Mike Bloxham in the Entomologists' Record
31 August 1982	Report of Malaise trapping at 72 Dagger Lane. Mike Bloxham
September 1984	The Nature Conservation Strategy for the County of West Midlands
1984	Sandwell Valley Archaeological Report 1982-82. M A Hodder
18 June 1986	Publication of Wildlife of the Sandwell Valley
25 January 1988	The Diptera (Calyptera) of the Sandwell Valley West Bromwich. Mike Bloxham in the Entomologists' Record Vol 100
1989	Sandwell Valley Records (additional to those in the Wildlife of the Sandwell Valley, going to the end of 1989)

January 1992	True Flies (Diptera) of the Sandwell Valley. Mike Bloxham
13 May 1992	Report of Malaise trapping at 72 Dagger Lane. Mike Bloxham & Peter Shirley.
1992 (?)	Coleoptera. ms Mike Bloxham
Autumn 1993	Report of Malaise trapping at Ray Hall Sewage Works 31 August 1 to 2 September 1993. Mike Bloxham
November 1993	A Checklist of the Flowering Plants of the Sandwell Valley. M Poulton, M Mountford
February 1994	The Hymenoptera (Ichneuminidae) Collection from the Sandwell Valley. ms. Mike Bloxham
6 April 1994	Diaprid identifications from Malaise trap at 72 Dagger Lane. Peter Shirley & David Notton
April 1994	Black Country Nature Conservation Strategy
30 December 1994	Hymenoptera of the Sandwell Valley, Part 5 Sawflies. ms. Mike Bloxham
1994	Sandwell Valley Flora. Mike Poulton
1994	Ray Hall Sewage Works Monitoring Report
January 1995	The Forge Lane Storage Area of Sandwell Park Golf Club. Mike Bloxham
27 March 1995	Aculeata: Chrysoidea to Sphecoidea. Mike Bloxham
1995	Caddis fly records 1979 – 1995. ms. Mike Bloxham
March 1996	Hymenoptera of the Sandwell Valley, Part 4 Apoidea. ms Mike Bloxham
March 1997	Nature Conservation Strategy for Birmingham
July 2000	Biodiversity Action Plan for Birmingham & the Black Country
2000	Birds of the Sandwell Valley. P Forbes, P Hackett, T Hextell
June 2001	Woodland Wildlife, the Biodiversity of the Black Country Urban Forest
July 2004	Flora of the RSPB Reserve Sandwell Valley. Sandnats Bulletin Vol 27 No 1

March 2006	Sandwell MBC Green Space Audit
June 2007	Extract from 'West Bromwich: the growth of the town' in Volume 17 of A History of the County of Stafford
November 2007	Sot's Hole LNR Management Plan 2008 – 2012. Peter Shirley
<i>Publications with some relevance to the Valley</i>	
1990	Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Survey
January 1998	Local Nature reserves A Time for Reflection, A Time for Action. George Barker
May 2005	The Mapping of Urban Habitat and Its Evaluation. Peter Jarvis and Chris Young
2005	Restoring the Region's Wildlife, Regional Biodiversity Strategy for the West Midlands. West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership
2005	Audit of the Towns, Cities and Development Workstream of the England Biodiversity Strategy. English Nature
March 2006	Brownfield Sites of Importance for Butterflies and Moths in the West Midlands. Jane Ellis (Butterfly Conservation)
2006	Managing Woody Debris in Rivers, Streams and Floodplains Nick Mott (Staffordshire Wildlife Trust)

### **Forthcoming publications and other Reports:**

#### **Fungi**

2008 sees Bill Moodie in action as we resume our biennial events. We shall probably be updating our fungal records during the year and will include a report in the Bulletin as soon as possible.

#### **Special series publications.**

Now that Tony Wood has been able to find some extra time, we shall be starting to review all our records and also do fresh survey (light traps and observation) to gain the additional information to produce the 'Butterflies and Moths of SV'. Please **watch the newsletters for the dates of events** and help us in this task.



**DON'T FORGET TO VISIT  
THE SANDNATS  
WEBSITE.**



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PUBLICATIONS  
CURRENT LIST OF WILDFLOWERS,  
LINKS TO OTHER SITES ETC.**

**At:**

**[Http://freespace.virgin.net/william.moodie/ sandnats.htm](http://freespace.virgin.net/william.moodie/sandnats.htm)**

**But if you search on 'SANDNATS' you'll easily find it!**

**THANKS TO BILL MOODIE & CLARE HINCHLIFFE  
FOR MAINTAINING THIS WEBSITE**

**Bulletin contributors were Alf Cole, Jane Hardwick, Jo Miskin, Sandra Oxley, Terry Parker (drawings of rook & dryad's saddle), Mike Poulton, Andy Purcell, Peter Shirley, Margaret Shuker, Paul Smith and Tony Wood.**

*I have certainly omitted one more artist- who is it and which beautifully drawn bird has been left without a label? (clue: Bird Book). Ed.*

